WORKING TOWARDS HE

A study of Aimhigher and learners with vocational qualifications

by

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1. INTRODUCTION

Background
The Aimhigher partnerships in the SW have adopted different approaches to vocational learners and HE progression. While some have worked at the level of the individual with young people and their key influencers to raise their awareness, aspirations and their attainment, others have taken a structural approach and worked with institutions or other initiatives to extend and develop the curriculum. The structural approach focuses on building appropriate pathways into and through HE whereas the individual approach focuses on the learner to provide information about these routes. These approaches are mutually supportive and are both appropriate for learners with vocational qualifications. Compared with their peers with academic qualifications, these learners are less likely to enter HE (HEFCE 2004; Newby 2005), find it more difficult to access information (Connor et al 2001; UCAS 2002; Tate et al 2005) and have fewer progression opportunities open to them (HEFCE 2004). To improve progression, these learners need more progression routes coupled with accessible information about available opportunities.

The tracking study has confirmed the findings from other studies (Connor and Dawson 2001; Forsyth and Furlong 2003; Tate et al 2005; Connor et al 2006) that those with no parental background in HE are more likely than their peers to choose vocational qualifications at level 3 and are also interested in the vocational relevance of HE progression. Since 2004, Aimhigher partnerships in the SW have worked with schools, colleges and HE institutions to develop and publicise progression routes for learners with vocational qualifications and this report will explore the extent to which this activity has been effective.

Aims
This report will examine the evidence about the impact of Aimhigher on progression to HE for learners with vocational qualifications. In particular it will seek to establish

- The profile of learners studying vocational qualifications
- The extent to which learners with vocational qualifications are progressing to HE
- The factors that affect their decisions
- The extent to which HE progression for vocational learners has changed since 2004.

Methods
This report has drawn on both qualitative and quantitative evidence to explore what is happening and the reasons that lie behind the reality. The regional partnership, Aimhigher SW, established a longitudinal tracking study in 2003 to follow the educational progress of a cohort of 580 young people who had been involved in widening participation activities. The sample includes a significant sub-set (120) of young people who studied vocational qualifications at level 3. The data on these young people has been analysed to explore their demographic characteristics, the factors that affected their educational choices and their likelihood of applying to HE at their first opportunity.
Responses to a questionnaire and a series of face-to-face interviews with 31 young people on a summer school for learners interested in progressing to vocational HE programmes in professions allied to medicine have also fed into this report. These students were almost equally distributed across vocational and academic qualifications at level 3, with 16 studying A levels and 15 BTEC level 3 in health and social care. The students were interviewed in six groups, three of which were exclusively for A level learners and three for the BTEC students. These interviews explored the reasons why they had chosen to study their level 3 qualifications, their intended career path, and their attitudes to HE. The interview data was transcribed and analysed in conjunction with a questionnaire that explored the extent to which these young people had previously engaged with Aimhigher and the impact of the summer school on their awareness of and confidence to enter HE.

The interviews with healthcare summer school participants form part of a larger body of work undertaken to assess the impact of the regional summer school programme. This has included face-to-face and telephone interviews with key stakeholders such as senior managers and academic staff in HEIs, healthcare professionals, teachers in secondary schools and in colleges. The healthcare evidence base also includes small scale research undertaken in each of the three area partnerships to assess the impact of one particular aspect of their healthcare programme. For example, the Peninsula carried out a six month’s study of changes in young people’s attitudes to and awareness of HE, the West partnership undertook a detailed evaluation of their mentoring programme.

In addition, six interviews were undertaken with the Aimhigher practitioners responsible for delivering strands of activity that focused on vocational learners and their progression to HE. These co-ordinators worked for the area partnerships and were distributed across the SW region. Two of these interviews were conducted face-to-face and the remaining five were telephone interviews. The data from each of these interviews was transcribed and analysed to reveal the main themes identified by the co-ordinators.

Finally, the report draws on a review of available literature on the progression of vocational learners to HE to situate this study within a wider context. The literature review enabled the team to compare their findings with those of others in the field to reach some general conclusions. Each of these sources of evidence makes a contribution to the findings and recommendations in this report.
2. FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

Aimhigher: formation by merger

The White Paper, The Future of Higher Education (DfES 2003) announcing the government’s intention to ‘bring together Excellence Challenge and Partnerships for Progression into a coherent outreach programme’ (DFES 2003) foreshadowed the launch of Aimhigher. Consequently, in 2004 Aimhigher came into being through a merger of these two separate, but related, initiatives. Although they shared the common objective of widening participation in HE, they differed considerably in history, implementation, funding routes and organisation. Bringing together a school and college based initiative to raise attainment with a nation-wide HE and FE outreach programme for learners in schools, colleges, employment and the community was extremely challenging, especially with respect to vocational learners.

The Excellence Challenge programme had been launched in 2000 to extend the work of Education Action Zones and Excellence in Cities partnerships by providing a designated funding stream for improving ‘access to Higher Education (HE) for bright young students from poorer backgrounds’ (DfEE 2000:p1). The focus was on schools and colleges, on the urban and metropolitan areas, on the 13-19 age groups and on academic routes. Although, in theory, Excellence Challenge recognised that ‘young people who come from families with no HE in their background are able to enter universities and other HEIs, not necessarily straight from school but some time in their twenties if that suits them better’ (DfEE 2000: p3), in practice, little was done about learners outside formal education. The rhetoric was not translated into reality and teachers focused on school or college based learners who were likely to progress on academic routes via GCSE and A level onto a three year full-time Honours degree. Vocational learners lay beyond the focus of Excellence Challenge, presenting a substantial challenge during the early years of Aimhigher as partnerships negotiated the ways in which and the extent to which learners on work-related programmes would be included in the Aimhigher cohort.

Partnerships for Progression had a wider remit. It was a comprehensive programme covering all regions of England, working with those aged 13-30 and with an explicit recognition of different progression routes into HE for those who ‘went straight into jobs on leaving school or FE’ (HEFCE 2001:p12). Although wider in scope and coverage, Partnerships for Progression was less generously funded than Excellence Challenge. Its comprehensive approach spread resources relatively thinly across the whole of England, bringing in rural and coastal areas that, despite pockets of severe deprivation, had not been part of Excellence Challenge.

The funding for Excellence Challenge and Partnerships for Progression flowed through different routes. Excellence Challenge was funded from the DfEE through the local authorities to partnerships of schools and colleges. The funding was not formula driven but depended upon the submission of a successful bid, meeting specified criteria (Gewitz 2000). This resulted in an uneven spread of resources across the country, with inner city areas getting the bulk of the resource. In the SW, out of 15 local authorities, only Bristol and North Somerset were in receipt of substantial sums of money, although small sums did flow to EAZ partnerships in West Cornwall, Plymouth, Bridgwater and Gloucester.

The funding for Partnerships for Progression came from HEFCE and, initially at least, from the LSC. It flowed to higher and further education institutions and was formulaic
with each English region having a ‘conditional entitlement’ reflecting current levels of HE participation and population. The LSC involvement ensured the inclusion of work-related and work-based learning within the programme. Right from the start the initial proposals recognised the need to ‘provide better routes for those already in work to increase skills levels and entry to HE through workplace learning’ (HEFCE 2001: p2) and ‘strengthening progression routes via NVQ level 3 from schools and FE providers into HE’ was one of the four aims and objectives of Partnerships for Progression (HEFCE 2001: p6). Vocational learners and publicising routes for their progression was thus central to Partnerships for Progression but peripheral to Excellence Challenge.

The integrated Aimhigher programme was inevitably influenced by its predecessors. The emerging Aimhigher partnerships adopted different stances partly because of the relative strengths of the previous initiatives. In urban and metropolitan areas where there had previously been generous Excellence Challenge funding, schools continued to receive the majority of the funding. These partnerships worked with teachers to include vocational learners within target groups and to provide appropriate activities which met their aspirations. In rural and coastal areas, the presence of Excellence Challenge had been limited. Although vocational learners were clearly included in the targets for these partnerships, the funding was more limited than in former Excellence Challenge areas, restricting the resources available. In many partnerships, activities with those on work-related or work-based programmes was seen as more challenging than focusing on academic learners. Given the need to demonstrate value for money and the funding imbalance between Excellence Challenge and Partnerships for Progression, many partnerships restricted the resources allocated to vocational programmes.

The SW partnerships

Against this background, the regional partnership and the three area partnerships in the SW developed their programmes for vocational learners at very different rates. When Partnerships for Progression began in 2003, the LIFE partnership committed nearly half of its total allocation to a series of vocational progression pathways. By contrast, the Peninsula partnership focused entirely on schools and communities. The colleges, many of whom worked in partnership with the University of Plymouth to provide a network of distributed learning opportunities across Devon, Cornwall and west Somerset, were encouraged to complement this strategy by using their institutional widening participation resources to promote progression for learners on vocational programmes. The West area partnership with a considerable legacy of Excellence Challenge funding in Bristol and North Somerset considered that schools were well endowed and decided to allocate a small proportion of its funding to a Pathways strand led by an FE college with a brief to normalise vocational routes into HE.

In addition, between 2004-8, the regional partnership received ring-fenced funding for a healthcare strand to promote progression to HE relevant for careers in the health sector. In the SW, this strand largely focused on working with learners in schools and colleges to raise awareness, aspirations and attainment, although there has been some engagement with learners already employed within the health service.

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1 For details of the activity strands of these four partnerships see Appendix 1.
Although all four Aimhigher area partnerships in the SW have all included work-based and work-related learners in their programmes, the ways in which and the extent to which these areas of work have been supported has differed. While the Peninsula started its Workhigher strand in 2004, it focused largely on work-based learners in employment. The co-ordinators were very clear that learners in schools, on vocational or academic routes, were the responsibility of their schools strand. One of the vocational co-ordinator made the boundaries very clear with the words:

‘I don’t have access to teachers because that’s all Strand 1 (Raising aspirations pre-16) and I don’t go into schools because, again, that’s all Strand 1 territory.’ (Peninsula partnership).

The Pathways strand in Aimhigher West and the vocational strands in LIFE, by contrast, held a mixed brief encompassing both work-based and work-related learners. In addition, the schools strands in these partnerships have also included activities for learners studying vocational qualifications.

Good practice

Although the extent to which the vocational strands have engaged with work-based learners has differed, there are pockets of good practice across all three area partnerships. The Workhigher strand in the Peninsula, for example, has focused particularly on those in employment and has engaged extensively with local training providers and employers to promote progression to appropriate HE courses that meet the needs of employer and employee

‘We’ve also been doing some masterclasses in a sort of employer – apprentice – training provider triangle. I’m working with some apprentices from Pendennis shipyard and with Falmouth Marine School, and there’s also some BTEC National Award students involved, and we’re doing series of 3 masterclasses at the Marine School……For something like that you’ve got to have the support of the employer, to allow their apprentices to take a day and to know what they’re actually doing with the college.’ (Peninsula partnership).

The Pathways strand in the West has undertaken an innovative programme of work with UnionLearn and with a local training provider network and has also produced an electronic resource, Focus on Careers, customised for use at local level. Focus on Careers provides accessible information on careers, qualifications, local FE and HE courses and apprenticeships, covering 13 key employment sectors, for students aged 14 to 19. It will help teachers, parents/carers, and careers advisers to support decisions made by learners in Years 9-12. The Engineering strand in LIFE has used its links with employers to organise and deliver an annual summer school for engineering apprentices. Although this event was well received by participants who enjoyed the challenge of the central activity, building a racing a green powered car, its impact on HE aspirations was limited. This perhaps reflects the immediate focus of young apprentices on completing their qualification as a route to employment. For this group, progression to HE would be a distant possibility and assessing the extent to which these young people eventually access HE is beyond the scope of this report.

The regional healthcare strand has developed a strong partnership approach to promoting progression. Located within faculties of health and social care at three universities within the SW, the healthcare strand has worked with local primary care and hospital trusts to develop an activity programme that draws on the expertise of both academics and practicing professionals. These events have been well received by
schools and colleges. The young people have appreciated the contact with professionals as it has helped to strengthen their orientation towards a particular career. For example, one student report that she

‘had concerns whether nursing would be the best career for myself. I was worried about many things including whether I would financially be able to train, and whether I could progress in this position. After spending time and receiving all the information I am no longer concerned and I feel focused and confident that I have made the correct decision.’ (Healthcare summer school student: West partnership).

The teachers have also valued the programme, recognised its potential for improving coursework, and hence impacting on attainment.

‘Because it (BTEC) is 66% coursework, I feel that when they have had Roadshows, or they’ve been out, they have been able to apply some of it to picking up marks on coursework. They’ve actually been able to, sort of, see real life situations.... I cannot offer that in my classroom.’ (Teacher of Health and Social Care: West partnership).

Reaching the learners

Although learners with, or studying for, vocational qualifications were key groups for Aimhigher activities, they appear to have had fewer opportunities to engage with Aimhigher than their peers on academic routes. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected from 31 year 12 students at a SW Aimhigher healthcare summer school in 2007. Almost half these students were studying BTEC level 3 qualifications while the remainder were on the A level route. This data showed that 75 per cent of A level participants had taken part in three or more previous Aimhigher activities compared with only 40 per cent for those studying BTEC vocational courses. While half the A level group had had a previous chance to stay at a university, only one fifth of the vocational group had been offered this opportunity. This raises concerns about targeting practices within schools and suggests that those students who go on to study vocational qualifications have not been selected for Aimhigher activities in their early school careers to the same extent as those who ultimately take the academic route.

Similarly, 63 per cent of A level respondents had taken part in activities led by a current HE student compared with only 13 per cent of those studying vocational qualifications. This finding is particularly significant given the importance of current HE students as role models and information providers (NfER 2001; Austin et al 2005; Gartland et al 2007).

This evidence suggests that teachers in schools and colleges are less likely to select those who ultimately study vocational qualifications to take part in Aimhigher activities. Although the reasons for this omission are not clear from our study, practitioners considered that, in contrast to A levels, progression to HE was unlikely to be embedded within BTEC courses or other vocational qualifications. This suggested that schools and colleges are applying the targeting criteria in ways that tend to overlook learners on vocational programmes for whom they might perceive employment rather than HE as an appropriate destination. Partnerships need to work with schools to refine their understanding of HE in the 21st century and of the Aimhigher target group so that more young people on vocational programmes are considered for inclusion.
3. THE PROFILE OF VOCATIONAL LEARNERS

Introduction

In the first decade of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, HE entry is dominated by those with A level qualifications. Although there are variations by institution and by subject area in the proportion of students admitted to HE with vocational qualifications, in 2004, 81 per cent of entrants under 21 had A level qualifications (Connor et al 2006). Looking at this another way, 84 per cent of those with A levels progress to HE compared with only 51 per cent of those with vocational qualifications at level 3 (Vickers et al 2007). These findings suggest that there is potential for expansion in higher education by tapping the pool of those who attain level 3 qualifications but use them to progress into employment not into higher education and this hypothesis underpins the work Aimhigher partnerships have been undertaking with work-related and work-based learners in the SW.

The SW longitudinal tracking study found that about one third of those in their sample who progressed to level 3 study by year 13 were on vocational courses. These students showed some distinct characteristics that reflect national studies (Vickers et al 2007; Connor et al 2007; Gilchrist et al 2003). Students studying vocational courses were more likely than their A level peers to:

- have attained four or fewer passes in GCSE at their first attempt
- come from a manual background
- have no parental experience of HE
- be studying in a college rather than a school
- be less likely than their A level peers to submit an application to HE through the UCAS system at their first opportunity.

Each of these characteristics indicates that these learners are a key target group for Aimhigher partnerships and they will be explored in more detail to build up a picture of those who progressed their education on vocational routes.

Attainment at GCSE

The data in table 3.1 shows that those students who study vocational courses at Level 3 have slightly lower levels of prior attainment at GCSE than students who study A-Levels. Although it was unusual for students to progress to level 3 qualifications if they attained fewer than 5 passes at GCSE, the extent to which learners were able to progress differed considerably between the academic and vocational route. Nearly 18 per cent of those studying vocational qualifications at level 3 had fewer than 5 passes at GCSE compared with only 7 per cent of the A level group. A national study (Vickers et al 2007) that used the Youth Cohort Study data to examine the experiences of young people in education from the end of compulsory education (at age 16) through to the age of 21 found an even starker contrast, with only 9 per cent of the A level group having fewer than five passes at GCSE compared with 30 per cent of the vocational group.
TABLE 3.1: GCSE ATTAINMENT OF DIFFERENT QUALIFICATION GROUPS AT LEVEL 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>5 or more A*-C grades number</th>
<th>4 A*-C grades number</th>
<th>Less than 4 A*-C grades number</th>
<th>All number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>number %</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>number %</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-Level</td>
<td>247 93.2</td>
<td>12 4.5</td>
<td>6 2.3</td>
<td>265 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Level 3</td>
<td>99 82.5</td>
<td>4 3.3</td>
<td>17 14.2</td>
<td>120 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The qualifications data in the SW longitudinal study was only collected data by these three broad categories of results: five or more passes, four passes, and fewer than four passes. These categories preclude any further analysis of GCSE qualifications in the SW study. A national study (Vickers et al 2007) was, however, able to distinguish the number of GCSE passes attained by each learner and found that 61 per cent of those taking A levels had achieved 9 or more passes at GCSE compared with just 26 per cent of those taking vocational A levels.

Parental experience of HE

Students whose parents have HE qualifications were more likely to study A-Levels than vocational qualifications at Level 3 as table 3.2 shows. For those students whose parents have HE qualifications, 87 per cent were studying A-Levels compared to 64 per cent of those whose parents do not have an HE qualification. Nearly a fifth of students whose parents do not have HE qualifications were studying vocational Level 3 qualifications compared with only 8 per cent of those with parents with an HE qualification. Since those without parental experience of HE are already disadvantaged in accessing parental help and encouragement to progress to HE, their choice of study route seems to place a further obstacle in their path (Connors et al 2007).

TABLE 3.2: PARENTAL QUALIFICATIONS AND POST-16 STUDY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A-Level</th>
<th>Vocational Level 3</th>
<th>NVQ</th>
<th>Level 1 or 2</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>number %</td>
<td>number %</td>
<td>number %</td>
<td>number %</td>
<td>number %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with HE</td>
<td>33 86.8</td>
<td>3 7.9</td>
<td>1 2.6</td>
<td>1 2.6</td>
<td>38 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No parental HE</td>
<td>98 64.1</td>
<td>30 19.6</td>
<td>14 9.2</td>
<td>11 7.2</td>
<td>153 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social Class

A similar finding emerged with respect to social class. The SW longitudinal study included a subset of parents from whom self-reported data on social class had been
collected. Analysis of the data from this sample indicated that students from non-manual backgrounds were more likely to be on the A-Level route than those from manual backgrounds while those from manual backgrounds were more likely to take the vocational route Level 3 courses as Table 3.3 shows. One in four of those from manual backgrounds were studying vocational level 3 qualifications compared with one in eight from non-manual backgrounds.

### Table 3.3: Social Class and Post-16 Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A-Level</th>
<th>Vocational Level 3</th>
<th>NVQ</th>
<th>Level 1 or 2</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manual</td>
<td>number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>number %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Manual</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Studying in a College

The reasons why young people progressed to either a school or a college for post 16 education were many and varied. Although, in some cases, the young person faced a genuine choice, in many other instances, the ‘choice’ was illusory and followed inevitably from a number of other factors. For example, in many parts of the SW, 11-16 schools predominate. In these areas, those who wish to progress to post-compulsory education are obliged to move to college in order to do so, regardless of whether they are looking towards an academic or vocational progression route. In other cases, although the school has sixth form provision, its range of post-16 options might be limited and might not include those towards which the student inclined. This was particularly significant with respect to vocational courses requiring specialised facilities for practical work that might only be available at college. In addition, the SW includes several sparsely populated areas where post-16 provision is limited and choice further restricted by poor transport networks.

### Table 3.4: Level 3 Routes at School and College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A-Level</th>
<th>Voc Level 3</th>
<th>NVQ</th>
<th>Level 1 and 2</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>number %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interplay between these factors results in an uneven distribution of young people between schools and colleges and between academic and vocational routes as Table 3.4 shows. The data showed that about two thirds of those in the cohort that remained
in post-16 education attended a college for this stage in their education. There was also a significant difference in the balance between academic and vocational study in schools and colleges. Whereas the vast majority, nearly 93 per cent, of the cohort sample in school 6th Forms were studying A-Levels, the academic route accounted for a far lower proportion of the students in colleges (58 per cent).

Nevertheless, the majority of A-Level students in this sample (57 per cent) were located in colleges as table 3.5 shows. The colleges also dominated the market with respect to vocational courses. The vast majority of level 3 vocational students in this sample (92 percent) were studying at colleges as table 5 shows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3.5: LOCATION OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF SUBJECT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Level 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NVQ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 or 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Applications to HE

The SW longitudinal study also confirmed the long-standing disparity in HE applications between those on vocational routes and their A-Level peers. Table 3.6 shows that whereas 41 per cent of A-Level students applied while they were in year 13, only 28 per cent of the vocational Level 3 students submitted a UCAS application. This was perhaps partly due to the fact that there was movement from A levels to vocational level 3 qualifications in between school years 12 and 13. Depending on the timing of the transition, these students might have needed to extend their level 3 study by a year, implying that a proportion of those on the vocational route would not reach the point of HE entry until the following year. This pattern of a fragmented educational career confirms the findings of other studies (Baxter et al 1999; Gilchrist 2003) that those from manual backgrounds take longer than their middle class peers to progress towards HE and tend to adopt more circuitous routes. This perhaps reflects the lack of appropriate cultural capital to help them to negotiate an educational system that was designed primarily by and for the middle classes (Reay 2001: Reay 2006).

Nevertheless, the application rate from students with vocational qualifications in the SW study was slightly higher than that for a national rate in 2004 (Connor et al 2007). In the SW cohort, 25 per cent of the students who applied at the first opportunity had vocational qualifications whereas in 2004 the national figure was 18 per cent for those entrants under 21 years of age (Connors et al 2007).
### TABLE 3.6: UCAS APPLICATIONS BY TYPE OF LEVEL 3 COURSE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post 16 Course</th>
<th>Applied to HE number</th>
<th>Applied to HE %</th>
<th>Did not apply to HE number</th>
<th>Did not apply to HE %</th>
<th>TOTAL number</th>
<th>TOTAL %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-Level</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>59.5</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Level 3</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>63.4</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

The data on the sample of students in the SW tracking study suggests that those who opted to study vocational courses at level 3 were prime candidates for Aimhigher interventions. By virtue of the fact that most of them they had attained 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-c and had persisted with their studies beyond post-compulsory education, they had demonstrated that they had the potential to benefit from HE. Since many studies in the UK and elsewhere (Thomas et al 2003) indicated that parental education is a powerful indicator of progression to HE, these students were prime candidates for Aimhigher which provides support for those who might find it difficult to progress to HE without the help and encouragement that the programme can provide. Since nearly 90 per cent of those in this sample who were studying vocational courses at level 3 did not have parents with HE experience, the Aimhigher programme could play a useful role in providing information and advice to support their progression to HE. Finally, other studies (Callender 2003) have suggested that learners studying in FE colleges were less likely to apply to HE than those who study in school sixth forms. Yet in this sample over two thirds of those studying at level 3 were located in FE colleges, indicating the potential for Aimhigher to make a difference by including these learners in their activity programmes.
4. FOCUS ON LEARNERS

Introduction

This section will focus on learners to explore the reasons why young people choose to study vocational qualifications, their perceptions of these qualifications and their intended progression route. It focuses on comparing the perceptions and attitudes of a group of students studying BTEC National Diplomas with those of their peers studying A levels. Although this limits the evidence base to a small sub-section of the full range of vocational qualifications, the boundary is both pragmatic and functional. It made the study manageable and enabled it to focus on those vocationally-related qualifications with ‘widely quoted equivalences to GCE A levels’ (Connor et al 2006). The findings are situated within the context of a literature review, making it possible to compare these findings with those of others in the field so that some general conclusions can be reached.

This section of the report draws extensively on interviews conducted with Year 12 students at a health and social care summer school in July. Quantitative data was derived from 31 questionnaires (16 A-Level students and 15 BTEC students) and qualitative data from 18 interviews conducted in six groups of students, divided by the type of qualification of their current study. Three groups (10 students) were studying for BTEC National diplomas, and three groups (8 students) were taking A-Levels. Two of these latter students were taking the double award A-Level in Health and Social Care. Quotes below are identified as coming from learners in one of the BTEC groups (B1, B2, B3) or one of the A-Level groups (A1, A2, A3).

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data and the questionnaire results. These were:

(1) The importance of the ‘vocational’ implications of level 3 study choices
(2) Concerns about HE progression
(3) Differences in the extent to which these groups of learners had taken part in prior Aimhigher interventions

Decisions about post-16 study

The students on the summer school were a particular group that is perhaps not representative of the generality of level 3 learners. They were selected for the summer school because nearly all (84%) were orientated towards HE as a first step on their chosen career path in health and social care. Both the A level and the BTEC students were similar in that their career- and university-orientation had affected their choices for level 3 study. For example, one A level students said:

I want to be a midwife so that’s where Biology, Psychology and Health and Social Care comes from, and then I am quite outgoing and an outspoken person so I used the Drama to sort of release my energy . . . because the other ones are so intense that sort of gives me a bit of something that I enjoy. (A2)

Although the BTEC students had also based their choices on their career intentions, they also emphasised their perception of the superiority of their route and the reasons why they had chosen it as the following quote illustrates:
I was thinking about doing A-Levels just because, I find that …if you say you are doing a BTEC, they look down on you a bit compared with A-Levels. But I believe that if we go to University and we do a childcare course, we have got more experience because we have done it already. (B3)

This point is interesting and reflects the fact that the A level route is often perceived as the ‘normal’ route. This perspective was echoed by one interviewee who made it clear that, for her, taking A levels was really an expectation, a non-decision rather than an active choice. She said:

Well, my school goes, sort of, straight into 6th form and A-Levels and so it was the path to follow. (A3)

Following this ‘normal’ route required no justification and thus the A level students rarely reflected on the reasons why they had not chosen BTEC. They simply took it for granted that A level was the best route to follow for those with ability who wanted to progress to HE. One interviewee, however, was aware of negative connotations attached to those studying BTEC qualifications and was keen to distance herself from this group. She commented:

I don’t know, this might sound a bit horrible, but I feel that they (BTEC students) are not so intelligent, they’re people who go to college, whereas the intelligent people stay on (at school). I don’t know if that’s just a view I have but I always knew that I was going to go and I thought for me that was the best possible route to get to University. (A1)

Some of the BTEC students were also aware of the low status of the BTEC route. Their perceptions are worth exploring in detail as they throw light upon progression to HE through vocational qualifications. The BTEC suite of qualifications are well known and extensive. They cover many different levels from entry level to the equivalent to level 2 in HE. Most of the level 3 BTEC students in this study had made a positive choice to study BTEC as they had attained the grades at GCSE to enable them to study A levels. Instead, however, they had made a conscious choice to opt for BTEC as it could offer them both vocational experience and study for a well recognised qualification. Their preference for hands-on vocational experience was more than merely a matter of personal learning styles. They perceived work placements as giving then a desirable asset for the future that would give them an advantage when they progressed to HE. As one student said:

‘It is better than doing A-Levels because you actually get vocational experience as well and, like on, when you apply for University they like to know you have had experience working with people as well as doing that written documents.’ (B1)

For these students, BTEC offered the superior route towards their desired goal. They were also keen to make a distinction between learners studying at the different levels of BTEC qualifications and argued that, although lower esteem might be justified for learners studying at the lower levels of BTEC qualification, their course should have parity of esteem with A levels. Whereas poor GCSE grades might consign a learner to a lower level BTEC course, “good grades” were needed for the higher levels of BTEC, offering students a genuine choice between A-Level or BTEC. The following quote from one interviewee notes that access to BTEC
depends on what, like, GCSE’s you get and what sort of level you get on. Because we are on the Level 3 which is, like, the highest one because we got good GCSE’s, so I had a choice. (B2)

In addition, the interviewees were the survivors on their course, the ones who had coped with its academic aspects, the ones still interested in university study. Withdrawal appeared to be a common phenomenon with one student remarking that “probably half our class have quit”, a statement with which her peers agreed.

These points are important and demonstrate the fallacy of treating all BTEC students as one group. The popular misidentification of all BTEC students with the least able BTEC students does an injustice to those of much greater capacity and potential. This sample of BTEC students – studying level 3, and the survivors of their cohort - probably had more in common with the A level students than with their fellow BTEC students studying at a lower level or with those who had dropped out. Both groups shared HE aspirations linked to their career-orientation and shared concerns about finance, the competition for university places, and the availability of jobs when they graduated.

Another similarity between the A level and the BTEC students was that, although they were orientated towards a certain type of career, they were by no means decided about the precise direction they would take. Flexibility was important for both groups and they wanted to maximise their subsequent options. The A level students considered that A-Levels involved studying of a group of subjects with transferability across a wide range of future study and employment options. The BTEC students, on the other hand, perceived their course to focus upon study and work experience within a broad vocational area, enabling them to make informed choices within their chosen sector. There was no sense in which they considered that the vocational nature of their qualifications was restricting them at an early stage in their careers. By contrast, their perceptions were that their course opened up a wider choice of destinations than A level. As one students said:

my friend’s doing A-Level but she has got a limited choice on what she can go on to…. Our field covers all types of health and social care whereas she is fixing on childcare. So she, it means that she can’t go into nursing or social work and . . . . (B1)

In these ways, both the BTEC and the A-Level students thought of their progression routes as vocational, and believed that their route maximised their subsequent options. Both were indeed right, within their own frame of reference. The BTEC and the A level students had chosen their study routes with their career direction in mind. In that sense at least, it could be argued that both groups were making ‘vocational’ choices about their level 3 options and that both considered that their chosen route would offer them flexibility and a wide choice.

Perceptions of barriers to HE entry

Given that these students were attending a summer school for those aspiring to university, it is unsurprising that nearly all the interviewees, BTEC and A level alike, were intending to apply to Higher Education. Table 4.1 shows that, even prior to the summer school, there was a high level of interest in HE from both sets of students. Interestingly, the BTEC students were slightly more interested in HE than the A level group, although these differences are not significant. None of the students said they
were not interested in HE and only a small proportion of each group said they were unsure.

**TABLE 4.1. INTEREST IN HE?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>number</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-Level</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTEC</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>86.7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>83.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a substantial literature about the barriers potential learners face as they seek to enter HE (Gorard et al 2006). Thomas (2001) for example cites educational, cultural, social and financial factors as barriers to HE for young people from under-represented groups, while many have focused particularly on costs (McGiveney 1993, Callender 2003). Although the review of the barriers to HE participation (Gorard et al 2006) argues that ‘the metaphor of “barriers” to participation is an attractive one’ (p9), they go on to point out the dangers of this approach as

‘removing the barriers to participation is not as easy as it sounds (Selwyn et al 2005) and this casts doubt on the concept of barriers as an explanation of non-participation.’ (Gorard et al 2006: p13)

Gorard et al (2006) classified the barriers they found through their literature review into three groups: situational, institutional and dispositional. The situational barriers are those created by the learners own personal circumstances, such as lack of time, distance from learning opportunities and the ability to meet the direct and indirect costs associated with study. The institutional barriers are those that arise from the institution’s policies and practices such as admissions procedures, and lack of flexibility about timing and location of study. The dispositional barriers are located within the individual and relate to their motivation and attitudes to learning.

**TABLE 4.2: BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A-Level (16)</th>
<th>BTEC (15)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to achieve grades</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving friends/ family</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workload</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving my area</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of friends/ family</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each of these categories was apparent in the students’ responses to a pre-event questionnaire which asked them to identify the factors that might stop them from going into HE. The responses to this questionnaire are shown in table 4.2.

For both groups, money was their overwhelming concern and two thirds of the respondents identified this factor. The A level students, however, were equally apprehensive about their ability to achieve the required grades, a factor that was less significant for the BTEC group and ranked only fifth place in their order of concerns. Both groups of students showed in the interviews that they were aware that the courses they had chosen were fiercely competitive and were apprehensive about their ability to win through against such odds.

I think, like, for the course at Cardiff they get about 800 people applying each year and they take 20 people a year on a course. The grades . . . are not that high but obviously the places that are available makes it competitive. (A2)

The BTEC students were more nervous than the A level students about leaving the area, their friends and their family and this could place an additional barrier as there lack of mobility limited their choice of course. It is interesting to note that whereas 40 per cent of the BTEC students were concerned about leaving the area, this factor was not mentioned by any of the A level students. A number of the BTEC students were intending to remain in the parental home, to reduce the expense of university. In the group below, wanting to live at home was accepted even though it might restrict the students’ ability to get on a course at the first attempt.

I cannot go too far away from home because I cannot afford the fees, so if I don’t get in here I won’t want to go, first stop….. I know what I want to do and then if I don’t get it, there will be no choice for me but to try again next year. (B1)

Pre-HE Information, Advice and Guidance

At its inception in 2003, the tracking study obtained 235 questionnaires from a group of young people who had been involved in widening participation activities. Some of the questions tested the respondents’ level of awareness of HE and the ways in which its opportunities might be accessed. Although the responses showed a high level of awareness, they indicated that Aimhigher participants have a particular set of information needs that, in 2003, remained largely unmet. These were largely around local and vocational routes into and through HE. For example, only 45 per cent of the questionnaire sample had heard about Foundation Degrees while only 29 per cent appreciated that HE courses were available in FE colleges.

Nevertheless, three years later, those interviewed for this study appeared quite sanguine. The BTEC and the A-Level students seemed happy with the advice they had been given at school and no significant differences emerged between the two groups. One student reflected the general satisfaction with the words:

I think, like, advice in college about Uni and stuff is good. They give you quite a lot of opportunities for like this Summer School.

When the students were asked whether they were reasonably well served by the information, advice and guidance they had received their response was general assent.
This is interesting as the provision of information, advice and guidance is an area in which a difference between the two groups of learners on A level and BTEC routes might have been expected. IAG has been thought an issue of particular concern for vocational students such as BTEC students (Connor et al 2006; QCA 2005; UCAS 2002; Connor et al 2001) for whom the route to HE is more complicated and the sources of information more difficult to access.

**Involvement in widening participation activities**

The questionnaire data suggested that there were significant differences in the extent to which A-Level and BTEC students had been included in widening participation activities. Table 4.3 looks at the number of activities in which the students had participated prior to the summer school. It shows that, although both sets of students had received some widening participation activity prior to their participation in the summer school, the A-Level students had been engaged in many more WP activities than the BTEC students.

**TABLE 4.3: INVOLVEMENT IN WP ACTIVITIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No of activities</th>
<th>1 no: %</th>
<th>2 no: %</th>
<th>3 no: %</th>
<th>4 no: %</th>
<th>5 no: %</th>
<th>number per student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-Level</td>
<td>3 18.8</td>
<td>1 6.3</td>
<td>2 12.5</td>
<td>6 37.5</td>
<td>4 25</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTEC</td>
<td>3 20</td>
<td>6 40</td>
<td>3 20</td>
<td>3 20</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>6 19.4</td>
<td>7 22.6</td>
<td>5 16.1</td>
<td>9 29</td>
<td>4 13</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 16 A-Level students had taken part in a total of 55 activities, whereas for the 15 BTEC students, the total only amounted to 36 activities. The difference is most significant in the number of students taking part in a large number of activities. Over half (62.5%) of the A-Level students had taken part in four or five activities, compared to only a fifth (20%) of BTEC students and in fact BTEC students had not participated in 5 activities whereas a quarter of the A level students had received this opportunity.

**TABLE 4.4: TYPES OF WP ACTIVITIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>A level (16)</th>
<th>BTEC (15)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>number</td>
<td>number</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Talks in schools</strong></td>
<td>12 75%</td>
<td>5 30%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visits to universities</strong></td>
<td>11 69%</td>
<td>4 27%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Short stays at university</strong></td>
<td>8 50%</td>
<td>3 20%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HE student led activities</strong></td>
<td>10 63%</td>
<td>2 13.3%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shadowing a student</strong></td>
<td>3 18.8%</td>
<td>1 6.7%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subject enrichment</strong></td>
<td>2 12.5%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Higher Education websites</strong></td>
<td>2 12.5%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.4 shows the different types of widening participation activities in which the students had participated. A-Level students were much more likely to have taken part in the full range of activities listed, and to have been heavily involved with activities such as visits to universities, short stays and student led activities that would have brought them into contact with HE students. This is of particular importance given that student-contact events have been found to be particularly most effective through the use of role models. For example, whereas 69% of the A-Level students had visited a university, only 27% of the BTEC students had had this opportunity.

The difference between the two groups raises questions about the targeting practices within schools. It suggests that those students who progressed to study BTEC were less likely to be identified for interventions at an early stage in their school careers than their peers who subsequently took the A-Level route. This finding points towards two conclusions. Firstly, it highlights the importance of reaching a shared understanding with schools about the inclusion of students who might progress to HE through a work-related route and, secondly, it indicates the importance of widening participation activities in colleges to catch the vocational learners who have been missed at school level.

**Conclusion**

The data collected from these two groups of students on the Leap into Health summer school suggested that there are more similarities than differences between those studying A level and BTEC at level 3. They shared a vocational focus and this had influenced their choice of study route; they both wanted to maximise their subsequent options and considered that their chosen path enabled them to do so; and they shared concerns about entering HE. These are important findings and challenge some commonly held assumptions about these groups. For example, the vocational focus and its influence on subject choice at level 3 is often referred to with reference to BTEC student but is less widely recognised in relation to A level candidates. Similarly, concerns are expressed about the extent to which vocational routes will lead students to specialise at an early stage in their education and narrow their subsequent range of options and it was interesting to note the perceptions of the BTEC students that they were able to make a more informed choice across a range of areas within a sector, thus extending their choice compared to their A level counterparts.

The differences were apparent in their perceptions of the barriers to HE and their prior involvement in Aimhigher. The BTEC students were more concerned than the A level group about the social aspect of university life, in particular about leaving family and friends and moving away from home. This in turn might limit their choice of course and institution and narrow their subsequent options.

The BTEC students had also been involved in fewer Aimhigher activities prior to the summer school and this has implications for the ways in which the area partnerships develop their relationships with schools. Teachers would seem to prefer to select academic students for their Aimhigher cohort and are in danger of ignoring the potential of those who might be able to progress through an academic route and who arguably need more support than those on the A level route for whom HE will seem like a natural destination.
5. FOCUS ON PRACTITIONERS

Introduction
This section will focus on the practitioner voice. It draws on a series of semi-structured telephone interviews with 6 Aimhigher co-ordinators working with vocational learners across all three area partnerships in the SW. These interviews took place in Spring/Summer 2008 at a point when Aimhigher funding for these strands of activity had been in place for at least four years. As the second phase of the Aimhigher programme was drawing to a close, this seemed like an appropriate point to take stock and review what had been achieved during the first four years of activity and the challenges that remained for learners and those advising them.

The importance of networks and case studies
To start with the positive, the vocational practitioners considered that Aimhigher had made a difference to vocational learners and their teachers. The programme had brought education providers together to promote learner progression and had also created an environment in which vocational progression was considered as an option.

The co-ordinators considered that Aimhigher’s greatest strength was its networks. Vocational learners need support at all stages of their journey towards HE – a journey that is often more protracted than that of the A level student with, consequently, a greater need for sustained support. The co-ordinators considered that Aimhigher had helped to bring schools, colleges, training providers and employers together so that they could work collaboratively to meet the needs of the learner. Although schools and colleges have often seen themselves as competing for students, one Aimhigher pilot initiative developed a level 2 vocational course for young people in schools, many of whom then followed the natural progression route to level 3 at the local college. The initiative worked to promote the objectives of both schools and college: the schools found that these young people attained good results boosting their position in the league tables while the college found a ready market for recruitment to level 3. The gains in recruitment persuaded the college to use their own funding to sustain the initiative beyond the lifetime of the Aimhigher pilot programme. As one practitioner said:

I think where Aimhigher’s helped is it’s been able to bring [schools and colleges] together and provide the right sort of activities that both institutions can take advantage of. ….Because they (the colleges) are seeing progression on to their courses, they are now prepared to put funding into it……. Sustainability is important and that’s been built in all the way through.’ (LIFE partnership)

The importance of the role model was another theme that emerged from the co-ordinators. One of the difficulties that vocational learners face is that, because only 18% of HE entrants (Connor et al 2006) hold vocational qualifications, it is hard to find those who have successfully negotiated this route. Sources of ‘hot’ knowledge (Hutchings 2003) are hard to access. In response, the Aimhigher partnerships have developed case studies showing examples of people who have moved smoothly into HE through vocational routes. These case studies can be accessed on the web or can be used as exemplars with groups of vocational students who are considering HE.
The co-ordinators also agreed on the importance of the demonstration effect. Although engaging employers and learners was uphill work at the start, once it got underway, demand snowballed as the LIFE co-ordinator reported:

‘When we started we were running taster days for fifteen (students). We’re now offering them to fifty people or more and we’re still turning people away.’

Across all three Aimhigher partnerships, there was agreement that, although challenges remained, Aimhigher had made a difference to the opportunities facing vocational learners. Co-ordinators from all three area partnerships were able to point to pockets of good practice where initiatives had been successful and helped to raise awareness and promote progression. For example, the LIFE partnership pointed towards the Apprentices summer school and the vocational GCSE in engineering, the Peninsula to the masterclasses with Pendennis shipyard and Falmouth Marine School and the West to their work with Gloucester City Council. These were specific examples of the ways in which Aimhigher has made a difference to vocational learners and their progression to HE and they testified to the success of these strands.

**Vocational focus and its implications**

As the previous section showed, the young people studying vocational qualifications considered HE in terms of its implications for their career path. This finding confirms the results of other studies (Connor and Dawson 2001; Forsyth and Furlong 2003; Connor, Sinclair and Banerji 2006). Those from under-represented groups presented their decision about HE in terms of whether it would help them to achieve their career aspirations, as the following quote from a 2004 tracking study interview illustrates:

‘I’d rather have a degree in something . . . that’s going to help me in my job, not just a degree that’s going to get me a job.’

Unlike young people from professional backgrounds for whom going to university is part of a natural progression (Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998; Hatt, Baxter and Kimberlee 2002; DfES 2003), if they are to enter HE, young people from manual backgrounds need a strong rationale for their counter-cultural decision. Their parents and friends are prepared to recognise educational progression when it is presented in terms of the qualifications required for a chosen career route. Indeed, those from lower socio-economic groups are more likely than their middle class peers to use vocational qualifications for HE entry (Connor, Sinclair and Banerji 2006).

The interviews with practitioners confirmed that their understanding of the term ‘vocational’ encompassed both the learner and their study route. One practitioner defined her focus as:

‘the people who are actually employed, like apprentices and advanced apprentices, (whom) I would term work-based learners. But I also deal with people in FE colleges doing BTEC national diplomas and I would call them vocational learners.’ (Peninsula partnership).

The practitioners’ interviews strongly reinforced the students’ perspective about the students’ focus on careers and about the applicability of their course content to the labour market. They reiterated the point that the main driver for these students was the desire for a job, rather than personal development. This was not necessarily a rejection of education so much as an acceptance of employment. The learners were pro-job rather than anti-education as the following quote explains:
‘the vocational learners that I’ve spoken with are very much focused on job, output and independence, financial independence and getting their own place. They need to be convinced one way or another that HE is not just this sort of nebulous idea of where you go to study, you know, something that’s not going to be useful.’ (West partnership).

This fed into the ways in which these strand co-ordinators approached vocational learners and the presentation of information about HE. This needed to focus on employability and the skills that HE would develop. As one co-ordinator said:

‘What they want to see is concrete evidence that paying for an HE programme is actually going to help their job prospects.’ (Peninsula partnership).

Since those with vocational qualifications are less likely to progress to HE and have more restricted progression opportunities (HEFCE 2004b Newby 2005, Watson 2005; Connor, Sinclair and Banerji 2006), these learners have particular information needs. They want to know about vocational progression and about the labour market opportunities that a degree will help them to access.

**Information Advice and Guidance**

Although the vocational learners had been satisfied with the information advice and guidance (IAG) they had received, the co-ordinators were not. They considered that access to impartial IAG remained the key issue for these learners in spring 2008 as the following quote shows:

‘That’s the biggest thing we do, when we do anything with them, is giving that information. It’s just surprising still how little information they get at school, and it’s amazed me, really, how little information they get a college! You expect that to be a norm; it isn’t.’ (LIFE partnership)

At the beginning of the SW’s longitudinal study in 2003, a questionnaire with learners indicated that, although the respondents’ awareness of HE was generally good, they were less well informed about local, part-time opportunities. These findings confirmed those from other studies (Connor et al 2001; UCAS 2002) that noted that vocational learners have particular needs for information, advice and guidance that have been less well served by mainstream provision. For example, vocational learners find information about course content insufficient; they want information about the ways in which studying this course will help them further their career and employment objectives.

Since the mid 2000s, Aimhigher and other bodies, such as the two Lifelong Learning Networks in the SW, have developed a range of resources for these learners. A study of progression resources available to learners resident in the South West (Watton and Colings 2006) found

‘an increasing body of information being developed for those on vocational courses, or at work’ (Watton and Colings 2006; p32)

These resources are available in a variety of media; some are paper-based, some electronic, some web-based to meet the information needs of learners or potential learners. Despite this, the interviews with co-ordinators indicated that the provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG) for vocational learners remains an issue. Interviewees from all three Area Partnerships had worked hard to produce good IAG
material but were not yet satisfied that it was reaching its intended recipients as effectively as they would wish. Although resources had been made available, getting them to the learner and their key influencers at a time when they can be useful remains challenging and highlights how in the provision of IAG delivery is an issue in itself, in addition to the production of a resource.

Although resources are available, getting them to the learner and their key influencers at a time when they can be useful is challenging.

The provision of IAG is multi-faceted and many people and organisations might be involved in meeting a learner’s needs. For example, Connexions advisers work in schools and colleges to provide advice and guidance for young people up to the age of 19; teachers reinforce this process by providing information about future study options and through their attitudes towards appropriate progression opportunities for young people; parents are important influencers for young people (Dodgson 2004; Brooks 2002) and so are peers (Stuart 2006). Finally, the chance to participate in Aimhigher activities can widen young people’s horizons and bring them into contact with students who have negotiated the route into HE (Gartland et al 2007; Austin et al 2005).

In all of these respects, this study found that those learners who have chosen a vocational route were disadvantaged in accessing IAG compared with their peers studying A level. Vocational learners were more likely than A level students to have parents without an HE qualification; they were less likely to be included in Aimhigher activities that brought them into contact with HE students; and, in addition, the strand co-ordinators considered that many of their tutors had not had HE experience. This in turn limited the tutors’ perception of the opportunities for their students. As one co-ordinator said:

‘Lots of training provision hasn’t got anyone teaching at the moment that’s got over a level 3 qualification’ (West Partnership).

The absence of HE qualifications amongst the staff restricted their awareness of the opportunities HE can offer and also distorted the advice they offered. For example, the co-ordinators reported that some tutors were hostile to the idea of HE. One co-ordinator reported that:

‘I’ve stood up and done a presentation with youngsters about HE and I’ve had tutors….. heckling me and saying to the group “Well! You don’t want to think about HE because you’ll all just get into debt”. …The tutors are not always that supportive!’ (Peninsula partnership).

Given that lack of HE awareness – or even hostility towards HE – amongst teachers of vocational programmes, one co-ordinator was quite clear that her main job was with the tutors. If she could raise their awareness of HE and convince them that there were appropriate and affordable routes for their students, they would pass the message on.

Until that job is done, however, compared to their A level peers, the co-ordinators were clear that vocational learners are disadvantaged in their ability to access information about HE. Educational progression is simply not embedded within course delivery whether the learner is at school, college or with a training provider. As one co-ordinator said
'With the vocational work-related [learners] the information, the sense of progression, isn’t embedded like it is on the A-Level route. You look at an A-Level route . . . right from the start, it’s about your UCAS application, it’s about HE. But I think it’s just not embedded within your vocational framework, in terms of pre-entry information but also as they go through their course.’ (Peninsula partnership). The timing of the delivery of IAG can also be an issue for those on vocational course, many of whom progress into employment when they leave school and only think about accessing HE at a later date.

‘What’s difficult is getting the information to them at a time when they need it and not when you can see them. And that’s very difficult with them because that could be anytime from 14, when they are thinking of going down this route, to 40, when it suddenly dawns on them that they are not getting any further and they need to do something about this.’ (West partnership).

About half the learners on vocational programmes progress to employment rather than further study and, in the work environment, the employer can act as a crucial factor affecting whether or not learners progress their study. While employers are generally supportive of apprenticeships as they can see the business case for having qualified apprentices, HE study presented different issues. Employers were concerned about the ways in which it would impact on their business as the following quote shows:

‘I think they [the employers] are concerned that they’re going to lose good workers, and they want their value for money. If their apprentice is going to do an HE programme, they want to know how it’s going to relate to their particular business.’ (Peninsula partnership)

These interviews indicated that IAG issues still predominate as inhibitors to vocational progression. Although the provision of materials has improved since 2004, getting these resources past the gatekeepers, that is the tutors, training providers, and employers, is challenging.

**Curriculum issues**

The provision of IAG pre-HE was by no means the only issue, however. Respondents raised concerns about the HE curriculum and about assessment. The different timeframes within which HE and employers – particularly private sector employers – operate was perceived as a barrier to the take up of opportunities. When employers perceive a business need for education and training, they want to meet that need as soon as possible, because the lack of training impedes business development. Universities, on the other hand, work to the academic cycle and can rarely respond sufficiently flexibly to meet the business needs. This was expressed by one co-ordinator with the words:

‘an employer or an employee might want to do a project management module, but they don’t want to wait till next February; they want to do it in two weeks time. There is no quick response. They’ve got to wait for this academic cycle.’ (Peninsula partnership)

The differences in curriculum and styles of learning between a foundation degree and an honours degree top-up were seen as significant amounting in the words of one co-ordinator, to ‘a very different kind of learning’. The concerns focused around the rationale for the dissertation, the requirement that Honours students complete an
extended piece of written work based around their own research. While the dissertation is seen as an intrinsic part of an honours degree, its appropriateness for foundation degree graduates was questioned by these co-ordinators, who considered that some universities were not paying sufficient attention to progression issues for foundation degree graduates and were:

‘setting them up to fail if they are doing a foundation degree which is very hands on, then suddenly they have got to do this 10,000 word dissertation afterwards.’ (Peninsula partnership).

Conclusion

The interviews with co-ordinators confirmed that vocational learners need to consider HE in relation to their employment plans, rather than in isolation, and recognised that considerable progress had been made in producing information appropriate to their requirements. They perceived, however, that getting the information to the learners at a time when they were ready to receive and process it, remained a serious issue. The likelihood that learners with vocational qualifications would take a route to HE that involved a period in employment increased the number of people acting as key to this process. The ability and willingness of employers or training providers to act as facilitators is debatable and co-ordinators were often focusing on ‘training the trainers’ alongside the learners. Indeed, this strategy promotes sustainability as one tutor, teacher or training provider will come into contact with new cohorts of learners on an annual basis and can act as an information conduit.

Although the co-ordinators were aware that progress has been achieved, they were only too well aware of the barriers. Lack of clear progression routes, lack of awareness by key opinion formers, lack of encouragement by tutors and trainers preceded a journey that would be far from easy even when they had entered HE. Current assessment practices on Honours degrees were perceived as building more readily on skills acquired at A level than those acquired studying for vocational qualifications. The overwhelming theme to emerge from the practitioners’ interviews was that, although there had been progress since 2004, good practice was not widespread and a lot more remained to be done.
6. KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has found that there has been considerable progress with promoting HE progression to vocational learners since 2004. Aimhigher partnerships have worked with other partners to develop resources, include vocational learners in activities, overcome resistance from training providers and employers, and highlight the routes through which vocational learners might progress to HE.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Good practice with vocational learners.** Co-ordinators from all three area partnerships were able to identify examples of successful initiatives that had helped to raise awareness and promote progression. For example, the LIFE partnership pointed towards the Apprentices summer school and the vocational GCSE in engineering, the Peninsula to the masterclasses with Pendennis shipyard and Falmouth Marine School and the West to their work with Gloucester City Council.

- **The importance of networks.** The strand co-ordinators considered that the networks Aimhigher has established between schools, colleges, higher education institutions, training providers and employers were extremely valuable. These networks helped providers to see the advantages of working together to promote progression for the learner and have the potential to benefit all sectors.

- **Potential for expansion.** This report found that learners on vocational courses were less likely to apply to HE at the first opportunity than their peers on A level courses. Whereas 41% of A level students applied to UCAS in their second year in the sixth form, only 28% of vocational students did so. This implies there is scope for expansion, particularly with vocational learners.

- **Target group profile.** Students studying vocational qualifications at level 3 were more likely than their A level peers to come from a manual background and have no parental experience of HE. This means that they fulfil the criteria for inclusion in the Aimhigher cohort.

- **Similarities between A level and vocational students.** The A level and BTEC students on the Leap into Health summer school shared strong aspirations to progress to HE and had chosen their level 3 study options with their career destination in mind.

- **Differences between high-achieving and lower-achieving vocational students.** The Leap into Health summer school interviews also demonstrated the fallacy of treating all BTEC students as one group with the popular misidentification of all BTEC students with the least able BTEC students.

- **Access to information, advice and guidance.** The co-ordinators considered that the biggest issue remains the provision of information advice and guidance to vocational learners. Although resources have been developed for this group of potential learners enabling them to access them when they need them continues to be a challenge. Compared with A level students, vocational learners are disadvantages because they get less information from their parents and teachers and, in the case of work-based learners, might even face hostility from their employers.
**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **Extending pockets of good practice.** Although all three partnerships could point to examples of good practice, these are not yet widespread. As there is scope for expansion in promoting HE progression to vocational learners, Aimhigher needs to link with other streams of funding to take this work forward and roll out good practice across a wider area.

- **Sustain the networks.** The networks that have grown up around Aimhigher have been particularly valuable as they span education sectors as well as including employers. The networks help providers to appreciate each other’s perspectives and to work together to promote learner progression. These networks should be maintained and developed within the area partnerships.

- **Targeting in schools.** Area partnerships need to continue to work with schools to encourage learners on vocational courses or those who might opt for vocational courses to be included in the Aimhigher cohort. The early identification of a cohort for the HE Progression Framework makes this recommendation all the more critical.

- **Working with colleges.** Learners studying vocational qualifications at level 3 are more likely to be in colleges than in schools and so it is important for all area partnerships to consider the ways in which they are going to engage these learners, some of whom might not have been part of the Aimhigher cohort at earlier stages of their education.

- **Working with influencers.** Teachers, tutors, and training providers are important conduits of information for young people. Working with these key influencers to build information about HE into course delivery will help sustainability and will ensure that the information needs of these young people continue to be met.
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