The research journey - developing and supporting a practitioner research network

A report for Aimhigher South Yorkshire and Higher Futures Lifelong Learning Network

Margaret Lewis and Louise Ritchie

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Foreword

Professor Sue Webb
The Institute for Lifelong Learning, University of Sheffield

The ‘practitioner as researcher’ tradition refers to a process whereby professionals engage in critical reflections and research on their practice. Various terms have been used to describe this process, including action research, although the more method-neutral term, practitioner research, has gained increasing influence. Education and health have been some of the areas where this tradition has had most significance. Yet within education the focus until recently has largely been in schools where teachers have benefited from the ‘teacher as researcher’ tradition advocated in the 1970s by Lawrence Stenhouse. Teachers have been encouraged to use action research to connect reflections on their practice with theory and policy analysis in order to improve their practice and contribute to the knowledge construction and research that has typically been the preserve of higher education. In contrast, professionals working in other educational settings, such as further education, or in professional development and support roles in higher education have only of late become engaged in practitioner research (Hillier, 2010). Yet arguably, as the foci of policy drivers to widen participation and increase lifelong learning opportunities include a wide range of people, not only teachers, but a range of professionals and organisations, such as schools, colleges, community organisations, employers and universities, there is a need to develop a wider understanding of practitioner research.

This report is a contribution to this wider understanding. It does this in two ways: firstly, it discusses and highlights the lessons learnt from the process and experience of setting up a practitioner research network among those involved in responding to national funding to expand and widen opportunities for progression to higher education; and secondly, it provides a publication platform for a wide range of practitioner research reports undertaken by professionals working in sixth form colleges, further education colleges and universities. The report is significant in two ways. It demonstrates the value of bringing people together to enhance their learning as ‘practitioner researchers’. At the same time, this collection of research studies documents in relatively systematic ways the impact of a number of widening participation initiatives in one region of England, South Yorkshire. In so doing, the report has tried to address the limitations of much current practitioner research in widening participation (HEFCE, 2006). By making these research studies publicly available and by discussing their genesis, the report identifies the value of practitioner research as an important part of an individual’s professional development; acknowledges that the professional in this field of widening participation encompasses many who are in roles other than that of the teacher, and finally, it provides suggestions for institutional managers and policy makers about how to develop a systematic research practice to facilitate organisations in engaging in evidence based initiatives.
Part 1: Introduction

There is a twofold sense in which this report charts a ‘research journey’ (Davies, Hamilton and James, 2007). In one sense it documents the journey experienced by individual practitioners who carried out small-scale investigative projects relating to their own work, but it also outlines the journey undertaken by the two university Research Development Officers (RDO’s) tasked with developing and supporting a practitioner research network across the Higher Futures Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) and Aimhigher South Yorkshire teams.

The first section of the report begins with a brief contextualisation of this project within the wider field of practitioner research and then goes on to chart the emergence and development of our practitioner research network. Part 2 provides summaries produced by practitioner researchers, outlining their individual investigative projects. Part 3 includes an analysis of practitioner researchers’ views on taking part in the programme. The final section summarises the research officers’ reflections on developing and supporting the practitioner research programme. The discussion includes an analysis of our model to support practitioner research and explores a number of key issues relating to this area of work.

Throughout this report, the over-arching project of developing and supporting the practitioner research network will be referred to as the ‘programme’ and each investigative research project undertaken by practitioners will be referred to as a ‘project’.

Practitioner research and the wider field

Even the briefest examination of relevant literature reveals that ‘practitioner research’ is a much debated area. There have been on-going deliberations as to its exact nature, value and quality, and the activities carried out within our programme have taken place against a back-drop of theoretical questions that include:

- What is practitioner research?
- What is the value of practitioner research?
- What is the best way to support practitioner research?
- How useful is practitioner research to the practitioner, their organisation and the wider field?
- What are the key challenges for practitioners undertaking research?

Although it is beyond the remit of this report to discuss all these questions in depth, a number of them are touched upon within this document. Further exploration of the issues will be the subject of forthcoming publications relating to the project.

Similarly, a review of the existing literature relating to practitioner research is beyond the scope of this report. However, it is important to highlight several key publications relevant to this field, in that they discuss practitioner research within the context of developing a practitioner research programme. Three of these publications are the outputs from an outstanding recent practitioner research programme, the ‘Practitioner-Led Research Initiative’ (PLRI), funded by the then DfES as part of the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC). This ran between 2004 and 2007 and involved three rounds of funding, each selecting up to 6 nine-month projects that offered practitioners the opportunity to undertake ‘hands on’ research as part of a group, with structured support.

Participants within our programme were each given a copy of the NRDC’s report ‘Practitioners leading research’ outlining the development and operation of the PLRI, as it includes the various research reports from the second two rounds of the initiative and we felt these would be useful as an exemplar to inform the eventual write-ups of our practitioner researchers (see Section 3, ‘Resources’). The publication was also a valuable resource for the two RDOs, along with the Impact report (Hamilton and James, 2007, revised 2008) and the handbook ‘Maximising the impact of practitioner research’ (Davies, Hamilton and James, 2007) both of which were outputs from the PLRI.

A document that has provided useful insights into operationalising a very different model is ‘CETTnet: the development of a practitioner research network’ (Thurston, 2009), reporting on the CETTnet network. This group, which also operates online, seems to be an open research ‘forum’ and aims ‘to support practitioner research through collaborative working in lifelong learning settings’ and includes a wide range of
participants from all settings within the sector. Although the network was at a relatively early stage in its development as our programme was progressing, the CETTnet report highlights ‘an appetite for research activity’, perhaps signalling ‘a shift in operation’ in this sector.

A key document that would have been very useful for us as a reference resource - if it had been available as we were developing our programme - is a report to the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) entitled ‘Identifying the Success Factors, and Building Capacity, for Action Research in the Learning and Skills Sector’ (Atkinson, James and Morris, 2009). Published in November 2009, this is a comprehensive report on research carried out as part of the strategy to promote action research as a means of quality improvement and CPD. The study focused on the following issues relating to action research undertaken by practitioners:

- ‘improving understanding of existing networks and activities supporting action research by practitioners;
- identifying how action research is being undertaken within the sector and the models used to support this;
- enabling LSIS to build on and learn from the legacy Leadership Practitioner Research Programme run by its forerunner body, the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL);
- identifying existing action research approaches where evidence exists that beneficial impacts and outcomes have resulted;
- identifying key success factors in using action research as an improvement tool at individual, organisational and cross-organisational or sectoral levels; and,
- developing a model or ‘framework’ intended to inform the future approach of agencies within the sector in terms of developing and supporting action research activities’.

The publication sets out in detail the issues relating to setting up a practitioner research programme and was useful as a comparator for us when producing this report.

What is practitioner research?

One way of thinking about practitioner research is as an overarching concept and Campbell (2007) describes practitioner research as ‘an umbrella term for a large number of research-based activities undertaken in the fields of practice in education and social and health care’. (Campbell, A. (2007) Practitioner Research. London: TLRP. Online at http://www.bera.ac.uk/practitioner-research/)

When reading within this field it is noteworthy that the term ‘practitioner research’ is often used interchangeably with a number of related concepts, principally (but not exclusively) ‘action research’. At its most basic, practitioner research involves practitioners ‘doing’ research. The recent LSIS report (Atkinson, James & Morris 2009) puts forward the following definition:

‘Any form of research involving practitioners as actors (rather than subjects) in any way’

Highlighting the inter-changeability of the terms in this field, the LSIS definition of ‘action research’ aligns most closely with what we have conceptualised as ‘practitioner research’ within our programme. This definition states that action research is:

‘Research undertaken by a practitioner or a group of practitioners, involving some form of inquiry into, or reflecting on, their actual practice, and involving some form of personal professional development as a key outcome which often also links to institutional development or the wider accumulation of public knowledge and understanding’

The key features of this definition link closely with the principal aims of our programme i.e. to enhance practitioners’ capacity to assess and improve practice and provide opportunities for personal and professional development. (Note: a full list of our programme’s aims are provided on page 8). Alongside the ongoing discussions around the precise nature of practitioner research, the quality and value of practitioner research has also long been debated by those in the academic community. Critics have argued that such research is too small-scale, lacks rigour and is not meaningful to a wider
audience. Booker and Macpherson (1999) describe the approach as ‘little more than picturesque journeys of self-indulgent descriptions of ‘this is what I did’…’ Proponents, however, argue strongly that the approach has very clear strengths and has a place alongside more traditional research for a number of reasons, all of which have the potential to improve the quality of services. Potential advantages of practitioner research include:

- allowing learning from reflection to be put into practice;
- linking theory with practice;
- facilitating practitioner engagement with research findings more generally; and
- enhancing the personal and professional development of staff.

Developing the practitioner research programme

How did the programme emerge?

The practitioner research network featured in this report emerged through co-operation between the Higher Futures Lifelong Learning Network and Aimhigher South Yorkshire. The idea for a practitioner research network was set out in a paper from the Higher Futures director in June 2007. This document reported a need for a more qualitative approach to measuring the impact of the initiative to support existing quantitative data available through monitoring and recording interventions, events and activities: Aimhigher South Yorkshire had reported similar needs. It was felt at the time that any qualitative material produced was too descriptive so, in order to meet this identified need for a more self-reflective approach to the evaluation of activities, the Higher Futures LLN and Aimhigher initiatives outlined a proposal to allocate funding to commission a series of research workshops that would lead to practitioners undertaking their own evaluation activities within a supportive practitioner research network.

From the outset, it was envisaged that the aim of our practitioner research programme would be to encourage and facilitate deeper reflection on practice. In addition, it was hoped that the programme would - if at all possible – also include the following features:

- involve practitioners from a range of different positions from both Higher Futures and Aimhigher;
- be practitioner-led research;
- be flexible in terms of the range and type of research practitioners could undertake;
- would be based in or around the practitioners’ field of practice;
- would result in CPD opportunities including the opportunity to gain more formal accreditation; and
- would result in positive outcomes for the individual practitioner, their organisation and the wider field.

What model was used to develop and support the practitioner research network?

The model adopted to develop our practitioner research programme consisted of the following key elements:

- two research development officers (RDOs), based at a research-intensive partner HE institution, to lead the programme;
- engaging practitioners through a recruitment process instigated by the Directors of the two initiatives involved (Higher Futures/Aimhigher) and then developed by the RDOs;
- research training delivered via a series of workshops at the partner HE institution;
- an opportunity to gain formal accreditation at Masters level;
- on-going support and guidance delivered by the RDO’s, both through 1 to 1 and group support;
- on-going monitoring of progress and quality by RDOs;
- a continuous process of dissemination, including links forged by RDOs with relevant national research networks.

The key features of this model are outlined in more detail on pages 9 to 11.
How did practitioners become involved in the research programme?

In order to stimulate interest and begin the process of recruiting practitioners an email invitation to an initial seminar briefing was sent out by the Directors to all members of the Higher Futures and Aimhigher networks. As a result, a total of 40 members of staff attended one of a series of seminar briefings about the practitioner research programme, outlining the strategy for building research capacity and providing an opportunity for participants to share previous and current experiences of evaluation and research.

The initial seminar briefing provided an opportunity for the RDO’s to gain insight into the existing research and evaluation skills and experiences of practitioners across the two initiatives. They used this insight to inform plans for supporting practitioners to develop and undertake small-scale individual research projects. Plans for support were also produced by reflecting upon the lessons learned through the PLRI and outlined in their handbook ‘Maximising the impact of practitioner research’ (Davies, Hamilton and James, 2007).

Further information was gathered via a questionnaire sent out to staff working across the two initiatives to establish previous research experience and to explore ideas for individual investigative projects. A total of 30 completed questionnaires were completed and returned.

It is significant that this was a recruiting rather than a selecting programme. The opportunity to take part was open to all those working within the two initiatives regionally - without the need for form-filling and bid writing. This and other issues relating to this model is explored in more detail in Part 4 of this report.

What support was offered to practitioners?

The support offered to practitioner researchers within this model included: research workshops; group meetings; 1 to 1 support; and accreditation. This model is outlined in Figure 1.

Research Workshops

The 2009 LSIS report highlights the increased collegiality resulting from group activities among practitioners from different institutions and backgrounds. In 2007, the PLRI had reported the benefits of bringing participants together at the start of the programme (Hamilton, Davies and James, 2007; 17-18). Within this programme, feedback from practitioners following the initial briefing seminar held in 2008 indicated that they valued the opportunity it provided to meet, find out about and share experiences with others working in this field.

This suggested that setting up a series of workshops would be the best way to support the practitioner researchers to develop their individual projects.

Therefore four half-day research workshops were delivered between April and June 2008, each structured to incorporate 3 elements: input from a practitioner working in the widening participation field; presentation, discussion and exploration relating to the research process; and a planning session to develop individual investigative projects.
The workshops were based on the following themes, to align loosely with the basic research process:

**Workshop 1 - Introduction to research, developing research question and planning**

**Workshop 2 - Data gathering**

**Workshop 3 - Quantitative data gathering, management and analysis**

**Workshop 4 - Qualitative data gathering, management and analysis**

The plan was to cover the remaining stages of the research cycle, i.e. reporting and dissemination, in further workshops to be staged at strategic points during the lifetime of the programme.

36 practitioners who had attended the seminar briefing subsequently went on to take part in at least one of a series of 4 research workshops.

### Accreditation

A key element of the programme was the offer of accreditation for practitioners who undertook research projects. The RDOs liaised with colleagues within the Department of Educational Studies at the University of Sheffield and it was agreed that the most appropriate accreditation route for the practitioners would be one module (Module 2 – Classroom-based inquiry) of the MA in Applied Professional Studies. This module enables participants to identify ‘action research interventions’ to enhance their practice, ‘learn how to manage and monitor change’ and ‘consider research methods to enable them to evaluate impact on learning outcomes’ (University of Sheffield website, accessed March 2010). Although the MA had traditionally been undertaken by school-based teachers, the department was moving towards opening up the course to a wider range of practitioners and so the module was offered to practitioner researchers on this programme, with funding to pay the course fees.

### 1 to 1 Support

Practitioner researchers were supported by the RDOs on an ongoing basis throughout the programme in as flexible a manner as possible. Practitioners could choose how to access the support on offer, including face to face meetings, group meetings, email and telephone communication.

In addition, practitioners were signposted to relevant resources. In the early stages the RDO’s produced a ‘pro-forma’ to support the practitioner researchers through the process of planning their investigative projects (see Appendix 1).

### Group Meetings

A total of five group meetings were set up between February and December 2009. The aim of these was to provide an opportunity for the practitioner researchers to come together to air and share their experiences, update on progress, and to focus upon data analysis and dissemination as these had not been covered in depth in the workshop series.

### What were the ethical issues and how were these addressed?

During lengthy discussions in the earliest phase of the programme, the question of ethical review and approval was addressed. This issue had to be considered at two levels; both at individual research project level and also at programme level. Since the RDOs with responsibility for developing the programme as a whole were based at the University of Sheffield, the institutional research ethics review process had to be taken into account. On the other hand, research ethics did not appear to have the same salience in partner organisations in the FE sector, where most of the practitioners were sited.

At programme level, the RDOs submitted the overarching project for ethical review at the University of Sheffield.

At project level, practitioner researchers were given a research ethics protocol to sign, committing them to work to an ethical framework based upon guiding principles developed by Aimhigher South Yorkshire (see Appendix 2). The issue of ethical research was not just a paper based activity and every effort was made to raise awareness and foreground ethical issues during initial seminar briefings, the workshop series and throughout the process of support provided by the RDOs.
What were the programme's dissemination activities?

Dissemination opportunities beyond individual project write-ups incorporated within this final report were uncovered as the programme evolved, including delivering presentations at conferences and submitting project information and write-ups for inclusion in National LLN Research Forum outputs.

Who were the practitioner researchers – and how many took part?

In total 11 projects were followed through to completion by a total of 13 practitioner researchers. A number of practitioners who originally intended to carry out an investigative project had to withdraw from the programme, for a variety of reasons – principally change in job role or organisation and workload pressure.

The practitioner researchers who completed the programme were based in a range of organisations from both the HE and FE fields, i.e. four from within HE institutions (two of the HE colleagues who took part were from Sheffield Hallam University and two were from the University of Sheffield), two from a sixth form college, one from the Aimhigher management team and six from FE colleges.

Five of the eight organisations represented on the programme were based in Sheffield and the remainder from within the South Yorkshire region.

The practitioner researchers held a variety of positions within their organisations at the time of the project. Four of the practitioner researchers were Information, Advice and Guidance and Transition Officers (IAGTOs) from within both the FE and HE sectors. One of these had two roles, i.e. IAGTO and Sector Development Officer for Health and Social Care within an FE college.

Other roles represented among the participants were:

- Sector Development Officer, Early Years
- Aimhigher Co-ordinator
- Business Development Advisor
- Widening Participation Aimhigher Projects Manager
- Aimhigher Area Projects Manager
- Tutor
- Head of Student Services
- Project Support and Monitoring Officer
- Programme Director for Foundation Degree and MA courses.

It is of note that not all of the practitioner researchers held teaching posts at the time of the project, nor did they all hold teaching qualifications.

What was the nature of the investigative projects developed by practitioners?

The LSIS publication discusses the issue of ownership and this subject is explored in relation to our participants in Part 4 of this report. From the outset on our programme, practitioners were given a high level of freedom of choice in terms of their research. This is reflected in the initial briefing invitation sent out early in 2008 by the Directors of the two initiatives, which had highlighted two very broad themes for research activities; ‘we are looking to encourage colleagues to undertake project work… with a focus on two themes: the ‘community of learners’, and progression and transition to HE’. As a result, the projects undertaken varied in scope and nature and covered a broad range of themes relevant to the work of the practitioners involved.

Themes included:

- sector specific studies, i.e. early years;
- student experiences;
- employers’ views on Engineering Apprenticeships;
- Level 3 students’ perceptions of HE;
- parents’ perceptions of HE; and
- engaging minority ethnic groups in HE. Tutor

The reports produced by practitioner researchers as part of this programme are outlined in the following section.
**Student Perceptions of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)**

Sarah Adams, IAG and Transitions Officer, Rotherham College

**Introduction**

In education, as with many areas of life, acronyms are frequently used as a shorthand way of encapsulating a wider subject, theme, cohort etc; for example, in Higher Futures we frequently refer to Information, Advice and Guidance, careers and progression as ‘IAG’. This research aims to investigate the terminology we use and how this is understood by the intended beneficiaries. This research will look at what students’ perceptions of IAG are, not only in terms of what they have accessed but also their understanding of acronyms and phrases we use. This feedback can then be used to inform the College’s delivery and promotion of IAG to students.

**Background**

Higher Futures is the Lifelong Learning Network for the sub region and its travel to study area, encompassing South Yorkshire, North Derbyshire and North Nottinghamshire. Higher Futures was set up in 2006. One element of the network was the creation of the IAG and Transition Officer (IAGTO) role; the officers are based in the FE and HE institutions that are part of the partnerships and work with learners to offer support with progression and applications to higher education courses.

A series of focus groups were set up to gain feedback from students within the Higher Futures Early Years sector, by investigating their perceptions of IAG. In particular I was interested to learn how this might inform Careers Education and Information, Advice and Guidance in College.

**Research design and data collection**

The research took the form of focus groups carried out in June 2009. These focus groups were carried out at the end of the first year of study to allow students to reflect on the IAG received over the course of their first year. The research was conducted with two groups of 1st year students on the Level 3 programmes – CACHE and BTEC National Diploma in Children’s Care, Learning and Development courses at College. The groups completed the activity independently of each other.

Students from both groups had received, during the first year of their course, multiple inputs in terms of IAG activities, ranging from initial guidance interviews with Student Services and Curriculum staff to guest speakers providing talks and activities during tutorial time. Some of these activities involved voluntary participation from the students, for example one-to-one interviews, and others were included as part of the programme of study, for example a visit to a conference for Early Years professionals.

The IAG and Transition Officer from the College led the focus groups, supported by an Enrichment Officer new to the College; the groups’ Senior Personal Tutor was also present. The purpose of the focus group had been discussed with the tutor prior to the event but this member of staff was asked not to use the relevant terminology in their explanations to students about the research, in order to avoid affecting the data gathered.

The IAG & Transition Officer introduced the session and the group was asked to split into smaller groups and provided with a question sheet and asked to write their feedback on sheets provided. Additional information was recorded by the IAG and Transition Officer on a separate sheet. Throughout the focus group discussion learners did attempt to clarify some questions. However, this was avoided where possible as it was explained it was about their perceptions. Learners were happy with this response and continued with their discussions. Where appropriate, questions were reworded or reorganised to encourage learners to discuss within their smaller groups possible responses. For example the question ‘If we are talking about your future plans what words and phrases should we consider using?’ was refocused to ‘If we are producing resources, for example booklets or posters about activities, which words or phrases should we consider using?’

**Findings**

The introduction to the focus groups was brief so as not to influence possible responses. The students were given...
sheets with the questions to consider.

The title on the question sheet deliberately left out the acronym ‘IAG’ to avoid initial explanations (see Appendix 1 for full list of questions).

As part of the introduction to the focus groups, it was explained to students that there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers and this was about their understanding of the questions and what they felt was an appropriate response to them. The feedback from them would be used to inform planning in College and support staff when organising and promoting activities and services to students. These findings have subsequently been shared with members of staff in College to support planning and activities for the coming year.

**Individual Plans**

Most responses indicated learners had considered their future plans either in terms of specific job roles or higher level of study. For those who indicated ‘unsure’, they were either at a stage when they need to make a decision about a particular route or were unsure whether to stay in education or find work at the end of their course.

*If they have changed, why?*

Experiences for learners during the first year of the course – some directly linked to the course i.e. different placement settings - had altered future plans in terms of longer term goals and job roles; for others the emphasis had changed from a practical route to a theoretical one. Students from their experiences on placements were clearer about working with specific age groups. Other plans had been changed as some responses, both verbal and written, indicated that learners wanted a break from education, with the possibility of looking at higher levels of study later on. Some had become more interested in higher education as an option after participating in or receiving IAG activities in the first year of their course.

**1st year**

*What activities have you done this year that have helped you with your course (what, who)?*

Students indicated that the following had helped: tutors, student services, placement supervisors. Names rather than specific roles of individual members of college staff were mentioned, but all named individuals were involved with supporting students with their time at College. In terms of activities, students indicated visits to universities, placements, voluntary work, research and practical lessons.

*What activities have you done this year that have helped you with your future plans (what, who)?*

Students indicated similar answers to the previous question, highlighting a mixture of named individuals and job titles. In addition to those indicated in the previous questions, university students who had either visited groups or been present at university visits, or people that they knew were at university were mentioned as being helpful.

*Are you aware of any projects that support your future plans?*

Here students mentioned the lessons in the common room. As part of the delivery of IAG related activities, sessions were held in the common rooms and in classrooms which were part of Aimhigher and Higher Futures activities.

**2nd year**

*What do you need to do next year to support you with your future plans and when do you need to do this?*

Here students indicated a range of specific goals, for example:

- applying to university
- getting the best grades we can
- finishing the course and passing
- filling in the UCAS form
- sending out CVs
- applying for a job to earn some money
- working hard
- achieving targets
- be aware of available jobs.
As learners discussed this question, some individuals started to ask specific questions regarding their own progression – ranging from general points of ‘I’m still not sure’ to some individuals who were interested in pursuing job routes not linked to Early Years.

Interestingly, the National Diploma groups’ focus seemed to be very much towards progression to higher education, whereas the CACHE groups focused more on progression to work.

**Other**

**What are you aware of in college e.g. projects, activities and people, who can help you with decisions about your future plans?**

The ‘other’ question was useful to provide a more open opportunity for students to comment more widely. Aimhigher, Connexions and Higher Futures were mentioned. However, this required further prompting to the students in terms of ‘are there any projects that you are aware of?’

Again this question highlighted that students recognised activities they had been involved in and staff rather than specifics, for example students mentioned extra lessons and sessions in the common room when they talked about university.

**Would a calendar help you with your planning?**

Responses varied and there was not an overwhelmingly positive or negative response.

**What do these words and acronyms mean to you?**

In discussion, the following responses were given:

**IAG** – students indicated that they had heard of IAG but did not know what it meant

**CEIAG** – not sure but would guess something to do with information advice and guidance

**Careers** – students felt the term ‘careers’ indicated what you choose to do for a living, job, different jobs, what (job) you will do later in life

**Progression** – the word progression meant university; getting better; different levels in jobs and learning; gradually getting better in the career I want

**If we are talking about your future plans what words and phrases should we consider using?**

The terms IAG and CEIAG were felt not to be appropriate, as for many of the students these were terms that they had heard but did not know the meaning of. However, when the full explanation was given, it encouraged them to identify people, places or activities which did support information, advice and guidance they had received. As the session grew to a close the smaller groups continued to discuss the questions and their future plans; this included next steps and who to access for further support.

**Conclusions**

Students were free to talk amongst themselves. The responses from students on the whole indicated that they recognised activities and people who supported them in terms of IAG. However, the specific use of the term ‘IAG’ was not something that students immediately recognised.

The response to the questions about the first year of the course highlighted that students recognised that they had received support from a variety of individuals. Interestingly, no one indicated on their sheets that family members had been involved in supporting them with their course and future planning. However, some students had spoken to family members about this, referring to them as ‘university students’.

Although projects were mentioned in ‘other’, and students appeared to emphasise individuals who were supporting them, what they get out of it is more important than whom or what is providing this service. The breadth of answers indicated that students knew who and where to access these services.

Titles of people who had supported with IAG during the year were mentioned, including Student Mentors. This has now changed to Enrichment Officers; the IAG and Transition Officer is part of the Enrichment Team and is sometimes referred to as a Student Mentor or from the Mentor team. This could indicate that staff are used to this term, feel that mentor is a more appropriate term, or just use it as an all-encompassing term when highlighting...
Vocational Training – ‘They’re all looking for the next IK Brunel’.
Revisiting the engineering sector in South Yorkshire for views about higher level skills.

David. E. Berry, Area Projects Manager, Aimhigher

Introduction

This project was undertaken during September and October 2008 to assess developments in the perceived supply of appropriately skilled individuals to the engineering sector in South Yorkshire. In the first instance research was undertaken to assess whether any elements of Aimhigher South Yorkshire activity for the funding period 2008-2011 could be directed to assist in overcoming barriers in the overall supply chain by encouraging and stimulating progression. Had previous activity in clarifying and identifying pathways from Advanced Apprenticeship programmes with institutions offering HE progression impacted on the supply of appropriately skilled entrants to the sector? What was the perceived result of the development of other routes, such as Diplomas? Had employer ability or willingness to embrace higher level skill development changed? Was there increased apprentice progression to higher level programmes? Secondly, the research was an opportunity to follow up previous work undertaken to produce a multimedia CD Rom designed to inform and assist apprentices in engineering and construction to make appropriate choices about progression to higher level skills.

Background

An initial research report commissioned by Building Pathways was undertaken by EKOS Consulting in 2003. This assessed opportunities for apprentice progression. (The Building Pathways project funded initially by Partnerships for Progression and Aimhigher South Yorkshire from 2004, was set up to identify and articulate vocational opportunities and pathways to higher education.) Follow up work focused on the identification of progression routes for Apprentices in construction, manufacturing and engineering subjects in higher education. The project examined existing progression pathways, identified barriers to progression and produced case studies of students who had moved on to higher education from vocational programmes. A development springing from initial research was the production of a multimedia CD Rom designed to raise awareness of progression opportunities for Apprentices and which offered advice and guidance for those seeking to progress. This incorporated ‘talking head’ case studies and examples of pathways and career opportunities. An extension of the work, funded by Aimhigher South Yorkshire, saw the production of a vocational progression database of courses for learners in Yorkshire. This is now updated annually and is accessible from the Aimhigher South Yorkshire funded ‘Yorkshire apprentice Forward’ website.

Early progression and pathway mapping activity was supported by two complementary reports conducted by Tamsin Bowers-Brown of Sheffield Hallam University on behalf of Building Pathways. These reports explored apprentice progression issues in the construction and manufacturing sectors, from both the Apprentice viewpoint and also the employer angle. The research with apprentices attempted to assess some of the barriers, real and imagined, that restricted actual progression to higher education. The questions for employers focused on skills needs and perceptions of higher education.

Thus with this background of research and development of the apprentice progression agenda this small research update was initiated in September 2008. This was an appropriate point to revisit previous work and review developments, with the possibility of continuing further partnership activity through implementation of the Aimhigher South Yorkshire strategic plans for the funding period 2008-11. It was appropriate also to link the results of the research to the drawing up of a new sub-region continuing professional development (CPD) programme updating the wider Aimhigher partnership on skills issues. Furthermore it was relevant to evaluate the situation in the light of continuing activity with Aimhigher funded projects and continuing collaboration with the Higher Futures Lifelong Learning Network vocational agenda. Further impetus for the update came from a direct approach by a ‘high value added’ engineering employer concerned about skills shortages and suggestions that there may be the opportunity to run some new dedicated engineering activities which might be appropriately supported by Aimhigher. The Director of Aimhigher, as lead partner in a key progression and widening participation partnership,
recognised the importance of engineering in terms of an identified priority sector as outlined in the Sheffield Economic Masterplan, The Sheffield & Rotherham Economic Study and the City Region Development Programme, and was thus interested in the updating opportunity this piece of work could provide.

At the time of developing this research activity, an online parliamentary e-consultation on engineering skills was underway which provided both a framework with which to assess the relevance of issues, not only from a South Yorkshire viewpoint, but also to assess the general timbre of sentiment in relation to the skills development pertinent to the engineering sector. Through the considerable nexus of contacts of Aimhigher South Yorkshire I was able to select a range of individuals who I believed would represent a fair cross section, and give frank opinions about the progress of higher level skills development in the sector, the expected impact of new qualifications and a chance to express their thoughts on how new developments, qualifications and opportunities would, in their view, impact on the engineering skills situation in South Yorkshire.

**Government policy on apprenticeships**

Apprenticeships are a key element of the post-16 education offer and continue to play a central role in the Government’s plans for growing skills in the economy. Whilst undertaking the research, several key pieces of Government policy were under development and implementation which were designed to maintain momentum with apprenticeship growth, namely the review of the Draft Apprenticeship Bill which became the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning (ASCL) Bill, the Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England (SASE) as well as the National Apprenticeship Strategy. Key features of these plans included a rapid acceleration in the expansion plans for Apprenticeships.

**National stakeholder views**

Several consultations have been undertaken at a national level through electronic means. The Engineering Employers' Federation (EEF - the manufacturers' organization, 2009) - expressed the concern that:

> ‘Only large companies have the capacity to invest in skills and expertise, develop and strengthen supply networks, invest in innovation and engage with universities’... ‘If the capacity is not developed here, the UK will become reliant on buying solutions from abroad’. (2009:8)

Recognition for the value and durability of developing higher level skills was also noted by Sheffield’s Master Cutler who highlighted the continued requirement for expertise in the sector, stating:

> ‘Some of the world’s leading companies and research institutions are now based in South Yorkshire, which continues to be regarded as a centre of excellence in manufacturing.’ (Creative Sheffield, 2008).

Another element of focus concentrated on the reputation of engineering as a career, one contributor to the government consultation reflected the employer concerns expressed in the Bowers-Brown (2005) piece of research, stating:

> ‘Changing the public awareness of engineering in the UK and raising the aspirations of children to become engineers will help employees and the country. This is not a single task or a quick fix but will reap benefits in the long term.’ (Engineering UK Forum, 2008).

**Research Method**

In 2004/5 the author of this report, in partnership with Judy Smith (Co-ordinator of Building Pathways) had acted as consultant to Tamsin Bowers-Brown who had interviewed twenty-eight senior managers in twenty-four companies, based predominantly in South Yorkshire and North-East Derbyshire, with the aim of assessing their understanding of higher level skills. The research indicated that although many of the employers considered progression to higher education a natural extension to the Apprenticeship, other employers would not facilitate access to HE learning programmes as they considered this level of skill above and beyond current requirements of the business. Analysis of responses found other key factors which restricted progression to higher education were finance, time and the ability of the apprentice, although there were also concerns about retaining apprentices within the company if they were to progress to graduate level study.

Using previous work in the sector as background, this research project aimed to provide a practitioner
opportunity to revisit the employer perspective on apprenticeships and progression in light of the new ASCL Bill. It also provided an opportunity to seek out opinions as to whether new qualification lines such as the 14-19 Diploma were understood in terms of their relationship and comparability to current Apprentice programmes, and how these new progression opportunity lines would potentially impact on Apprenticeship programmes in the sector. It was envisaged that research into actual and perceptual changes in training and progression opportunities might allow the South Yorkshire Aimhigher Directorate to provide suitable opportunities and initiatives complementary to existing Aimhigher projects and strands of activity.

The research methodology chosen reflected the relatively small amount of time available. Activity was to be based around a literature review, concentrating on key documents such as: LSC Rapid Review of Research on Apprenticeships, NAMTEC/SMF Technical Skills Audit (Confidential), Modern Manufacturing – Sheffield City Council/YF and the NAMTEC Improving competitiveness of UK metals industry report.

Face to face interviews were also conducted with representative players in the engineering field including employers, training providers, HE education links, Local Authority Coordinators and employer forum members. The main objective of the interviews was to glean qualitative impressions of the impact and potential impact of changes in education and training provision relevant to the sector.

Nine face-to-face interviews were carried out with representative contacts in the sector. Although the interviews were unstructured, the questioning regime concentrated upon:

- the nature of the perceived ‘skills gap’;
- the extent of training currently available and opinion on whether this provided individuals with the ‘right’ skills and attitude for the nature of employment in the sector;
- identification of the main foci of tension in the sector relating to the supply and demand for skills; and
- opinions on the Diploma in engineering. Would the Diploma route produce individuals with skills appropriate for employment and/or appropriate for progression to higher level qualifications suitable for the needs of the sector?

The responses were recorded in note form and analysed thematically in order to identify commonalities in the employer responses and to identify the factors that they indicated were most important to them.

**Ethical Issues**

A number of issues required careful consideration during the process of undertaking this study. As a practitioner researcher it could potentially be difficult to research views of partners, businesses, or bodies corporate, especially those with whom Aimhigher had worked in partnership or indeed would be expected to continue working with. In addition, representative players in the sector were likely to know or have dealings with other representatives, and any verbatim comment or insinuation could potentially cause problems with future (third party) relationships. In keeping with the project’s ethical framework all comments were anonymised to avoid this situation.

**Findings**

Key recurrent themes outlined by employers included:

- **Recruitment to the sector** of individuals with appropriate skills in terms of quality and in terms of quantity. As highlighted by one interviewee:

  ‘It's the experience of senior managers... with many years of experience in supporting specialist arms of the sector that it's apparent that there is a steady decline in underpinning skills, core competencies and knowledge in all sectors of the industry’

- **The challenges of upskilling the existing workforce** to meet the Leitch ‘Performance Line’ (Leitch Review, 2006). Unease was expressed about the cost of upskilling and also the potential threat of losing upskilled employees to a rival employer who would benefit without incurring those upskilling costs.

- **The Skills drain** through retirement and labour
turnover, and the contracting skills pool:

‘There’s no getting away from the skills shortage here in Engineering. As a company we’re not so short sighted to see that if this decline isn’t addressed the future of this company is bleak and untenable at worst and it’s not only for us but for many South Yorkshire Engineering firms.’

Employers were clearly concerned about their ability to marshal appropriately skilled human resources in the short and medium terms. Some acknowledged that the pool of partially trained or semi skilled labour soaked up from the 80’s and 90’s shake out of mining and engineering had now been completely exhausted. In the light of this there was common concern that increased competition for skilled labour in South Yorkshire could spill out into a wage-fuelled inflationary spiral.

‘There’s no single answer, a concerted recruitment campaign will produce some results, though with the paucity of skilled people in the South Yorkshire basin all we would do is fuel a wage war with other engineering/metals companies in the area. Not a good way to proceed. We would have people getting trained on our machines and processes who would leave to go to XYZ engineering who are offering 50p per hour more and £20 in petrol….’

• **General skills levels.** Employers were found to be generally uneasy about general skill levels of entrants to the sector. They expressed concern about the adequacy in terms of skills portfolios of apprentice completers:

‘The current Advanced Apprenticeship falls woefully short of delivering me a person to the shop floor with more than the most basic engineering skills. It takes me a long time to turn this person into someone who’s going to be a revenue earner for the company.’

They also expressed reservations about certain aspects of graduate recruits, particularly the job readiness of graduates:

‘Even recruitment of graduates can be problematical – their skill levels may be adequate and they’ve been generally numerate and literate however they get frustrated quickly and expect rapid movement through the company without spending much time doing any practical engineering work. Often they’re more interested in the management or the marketing side than getting their hands dirty with engineering. In comparison though none of those who have progressed through the apprenticeship route have gone for jobs - say in sales.’

A number of other themes were also identified including:

**Attitude/ambition of graduates**

The attitude and ambition of graduates was also an issue:

‘I think it’s fair enough to generalise about the differences with some of our graduates - they don’t have the same degree of loyalty to the company as many of our Apprentices who have progressed through. Luckily we are in a position to offer good salary packages, so this keeps the competition at bay and we have managed to retain most of them. Quite a few have unrealistic expectations. We had one applying for the post of Process Manager after only 1 year’s experience’

**Overall supply of skilled workers**

General pessimism was expressed about the overall supply of skilled workers and there was apprehension amongst some employers that the current system will not deliver individuals in sufficient numbers with the right level of skills. Further there was concern that companies needed to be pro-active in terms of attracting and nurturing potential recruits:

‘I’ve heard plenty of talk about shortage of skilled recruits for engineering. We’re a fairly strong company with an image and luckily we probably don’t have to try too hard to recruit - but I know that’s not the case for other companies. They complain they can’t get the level of interest or recruits they want. Having said that we’ve put a lot of effort into developing our links with schools such as Hinde House with ambassador schemes and the like. We do SET and science week activities and master classes. We don’t sit around waiting for people to come to us - and we interview rigorously to pick the right people. If you aren’t big enough to do that then you could have problems.’
Concerns about current apprenticeship programmes

Similar apprehensions emerged from discussions with sector bodies’ representatives. Concerns were expressed as to the depth and length of apprenticeship programmes, as offered by training providers:

‘We do have concerns that current apprenticeship programmes leave out sections of skills that employers think essential for basic engineering competencies.’

Furthermore other perceived inadequacies of the training were pointed out – for instance there being little or no elements of foundry work practice in any of the programmes. Some disquiet was also expressed concerning a possible conflict of interest that training providers faced - a quantity or quality dichotomy. Training providers, it was alleged, were faced with the problem of producing completers rather than necessarily instilling deeper competencies in trainees. Furthermore specific modern ‘high tech’ skills training was lacking or missing entirely - especially CNC, CAD, and electronics knowledge and competencies. It was believed that training providers settled instead for more traditional units of study.

Lack of high tech training facilities

Concerns were also expressed about the lack of high tech ‘hands-on’ training facilities – although it was acknowledged that Sheffield City Council and other partners were at least starting to address this problem with the opening of the Sheffield Engineering Training Centre in 2009. More specific complaints were leveled at more basic issues – such as training manuals for NVQ (even course notes) not being in evidence. Further it was believed that rectification of the literacy and numeracy skills deficiencies of a fair number of trainees detracted considerably from engineering skills learning:

‘There are complaints that apprentices especially at Level 2 need a good deal of time spent on key skills and basic skills type training. This takes teaching time away from the core engineering skills’

Training provider perspectives

A third element in the picture was the opinion of training providers. Their concerns were often reflections of employer and sector bodies’ concerns, but from a perspective further along in the skills supply chain. There were a variety of opinions on a range of issues such as the limited ability of Training Providers to fill training quotas with students with GCSEs of sufficient number or calibre:

‘We have to work with the standards of kids the schools put out, and if the employers don’t like it there’s not much we can do about it.’

Also the general level of maths ability held by school leavers joining schemes was a cause for concern. Attempts to cure basic skills deficiencies were not always considered satisfactory as there were perceived opportunity costs concerning the time used up on the training programmes:

‘Some of our employers don’t like any classroom situation requirements, and this causes problems when we have apprentices with deficiencies in the basic skills area.’

Training providers had concerns about unrealistically ‘high’ expectations of employers. They expressed unease at the persistent criticisms of some employers regarding the calibre of completers, both from NVQ programmes and also in some cases from the general skill levels of apprentices completing L2 and L3 apprenticeships:

‘They’re all looking for the next IK Brunel - but they’re going to be disappointed’

Confusion about the new Diploma, and its relationship (if any) with the existing Apprenticeship framework and NVQ was evident.

‘I have some problems with this at the moment. I don’t think anyone’s actually told me at this time how the Diploma matches up with the Apprenticeship Framework. I think the Diploma is light on practical experience and there’s no way the two week work experience will match up with employers’ expectations of what practical skills are all about’
Reflections From A National Perspective

The Parliamentary e-consultation reflected many similar issues in Engineering across the country. This e-consultation ‘Engineering in the UK’ moderated by Mr Phil Willis MP, Chairman of the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee was of direct relevance to this report.

A number of key questions were asked concerning the state of the engineering sector in the UK. Two particular questions allowed reflection on the questions asked of employers, training providers and other sector players in South Yorkshire and helped qualify responses received. These were 1) How easy is it to recruit the engineering staff you need? and 2) What is the biggest challenge engineering faces? Comments posted on the e-consultation site in relation to these 2 (of the 4) questions asked in the consultation were most relevant to this piece of research. Those posting the comments represented a wide range of interests and included Managing Directors, Training Managers within companies and Training Providers, as well as professional engineers and those involved in Further Education provision.

There is strong resonance between comments made by engineering employers, sector bodies and training partners in South Yorkshire and those made from other parties across the UK, as this sample of answers to two of the standard questions indicates. I have selected a few indicative responses and grouped these together and related them to general topic areas which seemed to be relevant to, and to re-enforce emergent opinions and concerns expressed by those in South Yorkshire.

1) Attitude – including honesty and awareness of recruits to the sector

‘We need people who understand the basic concept of working for an employer and a willingness to learn our business…”

‘Impossible to find good staff off the street - (there’s) a non-existent work ethic…”

‘CV’s that look very nice but are largely works of fiction…”

‘Candidates are more skilled at CV writing than engineering…”

These comments relate well to previous observations concerning the shortage of a ready-made talent pool waiting to be recruited, and outline the necessity for employers to seek their own solutions to redress staff shortages, by for instance investing in staff training and skills updating, as well as working with training providers to recruit and attract new entrants, and also interest in helping to develop the new Diploma. Further it is clear why some of the larger employers in South Yorkshire are pro-active in engaging with school learners the SET programme to create a seed bed of potential trainees for the short and medium term.

2) The ‘skills shortage’

‘Real machinists are all retiring and none have been trained properly for years, those that have been trained have not been taught in relevant environments…”

‘Basic standards of technical knowledge and even literacy are clearly too much to ask for nowadays…”

’a lack of competent machinists willing to actually work for a living’

‘...(difficult to find ) competent school leavers willing to be taught a trade as well as work for a whole week at a time’

‘...difficult to attract good quality engineers despite offering attractive salary packages…”

These resonate with comments made concerning the experience of employers who had noted the end of the possibilities of relying on the previous shake out from mining and engineering firms in the sub region, and also some reflection on the general basic skill competence and work attitudes of the pool of available talent.

3) Issues with Graduate recruits

Whilst it was noted in South Yorkshire that there are excellent graduates coming out from local and national HE programmes there are still some issues of concern:
‘It is possible to recruit graduates, but often their aspirations for progression are not compatible with developing deep engineering experience.’

‘Candidates need to temper ambition with reality – recently had a grad with 1 years experience applying for the post of chief engineer...’

‘...fewer and fewer graduates (for example) who are prepared to invest the time and effort it takes to develop the depth of experience required...’

Employability skills - which are non-technical skills and competencies required for effective and successful participation in the workplace have been an increasingly important element in HE provision. It isn’t hard to see why these course elements are persistently high on employers’ wish lists.

4) Structural issues

These were keenly discussed and debated by all contacts made during the course of the research. Many of the interviewees referred back to various training levies and the days of bodies such as the Engineering Industry Training Board as being a golden era. It was hinted that perhaps the free market hadn’t provided the longer term solution to the supply of skills and that various interests in the sector now saw co-operation and partnership as the way forward. However a key question was whether sufficient numbers were taking science based subjects at school.

‘Not enough students following suitable subjects at A level (maths, physics) - not enough with suitable A levels are choosing to follow an engineering degree...’

‘...government funding, which is currently not enough to ensure we (college education sector) have the most up to date equipment and can retain the highest calibre teachers...’

‘affordable system of training provision that caters for the needs of the local industry...’

‘We need to encourage schools to promote science and technology careers.’

Developments

Many of the comments concerning structural issues were reflected in comments made in South Yorkshire - particularly in relation to the ability of institutions such as colleges and training providers to purchase and maintain the latest ‘high tech’ machinery, equipment and facilities in order to produce trainees with competencies developed and tested on up to date equipment. Again a co-operative partnership-based approach was seen to offer a way out of the skills shortage situation. The discussion and answers to questions posed in the research could have been interpreted as being reflective of a pessimistic scenario.

However, in the face of what could appear to be overwhelming panoply of foreboding and predicted decline, there were many enthusiastic comments about developments. Also, despite the rather gloomy summary of problems and difficulties in terms of the supply of appropriately skilled individuals to the engineering sector in South Yorkshire, there were a number of indications of an increasing awareness of need for co-ordinated action - amongst training providers, employers, government, local authorities and sector bodies.

Training providers

Developments showed increasing awareness of the need to co-operate and get on board with initiatives to attract new entrants to the sector. This report was initiated partly as a result of consultation by employers with Aimhigher South Yorkshire in an attempt to raise the profile of engineering opportunities. One apprentice coordinator highlighted:

‘We’re now seeing employers recognising the Apprenticeship as an appropriate seed bed for the sector and expecting us not just to take on those kids with grade C’s but to seek out those with some ambition. It’s taken a while but we’re moving our game upwards companies are now developing links with schools & building relationships’

A further interviewee stated:

‘There are plenty of examples of companies starting to realise that maybe they’re going to have to start co-operating with each other and the schools and colleges...’
to get the kind of engineering skills they need. They’ve spent too long (the companies) picking up the remnants of the local mining and engineering industry and trying to train them up - but now that pool is exhausted and they look round and there’s nobody out there then it’s set the alarm bells ringing.’

Increasing demand for participation amongst apprenticeship schemes was also highlighted by an apprentice coordinator:

‘This year we’ve had 330 applicants for 70 places on the training scheme. It means we can now take the successful ones to a higher level.’

Representative Sector bodies

Increasing interest in part time upskilling through foundation degrees (FDs) and other schemes was reported. This view has been backed up by discussion and data supplied by the Higher Futures Lifelong Learning Network. Their analysis has revealed increasing interest in FDs as new qualifications. It is interesting to note that some FDs have been developed with local employers. Preliminary data collected by Higher Futures has indicated increase in the uptake of FDs particularly by those in employment (including apprentices) at the both FE Colleges and through HE provision. General support for development of a larger pool of potential entrants with Engineering Diploma was also highlighted.

Increasing awareness of the need for co-ordinated action to develop higher level skills, amongst training providers, employers, government, local authorities and sector bodies as highlighted in the 2008 Apprenticeship Expansion Programme Trial Prospectus:

‘For individuals, better skills and economically viable qualifications are a route to achieving better jobs, career progression and higher incomes. For employers, a more highly skilled workforce is a route to achieving higher productivity, greater competitiveness and increased profitability...’

Training providers interviewed were aware that employers are concerned at the general skill levels of apprentices completing L2 and L3 apprenticeships, as one training manager indicated: ‘We’re well aware the employers are expecting us to ‘up the game’.

Partnership working to support development of the Diploma

This has been piloted in selected Sheffield and Rotherham schools with direct support from the Local Authority, under the leadership of a joint Borough Co-ordinator, and with the support of engineering employers in South Yorkshire. A current pilot is underway in Sheffield and also with other Local Authorities around the country. This pilot has concentrated on a Level 2 cohort of 40 learners and a smaller Level 3 cohort of 14. Particular features of the programme make interesting reading:

- learners are carefully selected from high calibre applicants
- there is active parental involvement in choice process and initial assessment
- emphasis for the individual will be on ‘capability to develop’ rather than a specific ‘job ready’ individual
- parents reportedly actively questioned the possibilities of ‘progression to HE’ via the diploma route
- cohorts were largely selected from Widening Participation backgrounds
- frequent concerns about engineering training at apprenticeship level, and on diploma content training programmes in general have centred around maths competence. This appears to have been tackled ‘head on’ - in the Sheffield Diploma pilot maths A level will be ‘compulsory’
- work is proceeding to match Dip L2 and Apprentice L2 programmes

An encouraging development likely to please employers is the institution of a new dedicated local authority funded training centre with up to the minute equipment.

Higher Futures’ Lifelong Learning Network (LLN)

In recognition of the importance of engineering to the general economic health of the sub-sector, and in response to employer requests, the LLN covering the Sheffield City region is concentrated on developments in progression and curriculum opportunities for the sector.
Higher Futures has been active in funding positions which have concentrated on working on transitional issues around level 3 maths. This has involved recruitment of Engineering sector development staff from both FE and HE, and also employment of a Maths development officer - and the development of a bridging unit for engineering trainees to higher education provision.

Further there has been active curriculum development involving mapping for progression from level 3 vocational courses to HE level 1 courses as well as new FD developments (Control Technology and Integrated Engineering) in conjunction with local engineering employers.

Conclusions

The industry is at a turning point in that the supply of suitably qualified personnel in the UK workforce has tipped into shortage. Demand for people is forecast to rise further, increasing pressure on the labour market. Employment costs are rising rapidly in some disciplines. There is increasing evidence of poaching and European sources are becoming more difficult to access' (ECITB website).

Comments on the 'Bridging the Gap' section of the ECITB website neatly summarise the situation facing the sector nationally and locally. The scale of the challenge facing the sector in terms of skills can be assessed: ‘There are challenging times ahead: a skills shortage with an ageing workforce, ageing energy infrastructure and the imperative to reduce carbon emissions.’

The skills situation is recognised as being acute by South Yorkshire engineering employers. The projections that demand for the industry workforce is likely to rise by 5% a year for the next few years, compounded by the problem of an ageing workforce, seems to achieve general consensus. There is a growing awareness that the sector needs to recruit, develop and upskill a large number of people by 2014, in order to maintain its skills base.

Steps are underway to ease skills shortages, through a number of key changes – the development of the Diploma, Apprenticeships and Work-based Learning Schemes and also working closely with companies. As highlighted by one training manager interviewed as part of this research:

‘Diplomas have been created with the support and expertise of a wide variety of leading employers.... In engineering in Sheffield we have put together a powerful grouping of companies and schools....’

Indications are that there is broader recognition that a partnership approach is needed to solve the key issues concerning the skills shortage. Effort is being made by employers, training providers and educationalists to meet skills needs in terms of producing the 'raw human resource material' that industry requires.

Employers are aware they need to offer appropriate employment packages, training schemes and satisfying career opportunities, and also be pro-active in recruitment – even grooming of potential entrants to the sector. They are also aware that even in South Yorkshire the challenge for attracting young people to engineering is changing the perception of what an engineering career is like.

All players are aware that development of the qualifications framework especially at level 3 through the Diploma will help meet industries' needs better at the intermediate level, with a view to providing appropriate numbers of entrants who may be available for upskilling to higher level skills. Players are also supportive of initiatives such as the ‘Engineer Your Future’ School Roadshow to attract more entrants, and keen to support foundation degrees and pathway developments through work undertaken by partnership organisations such as Higher Futures, which will allow a greater number of students to gain higher level skills and provide pathways to new Masters courses leading to Chartered Engineer Status. There is clear scope for co-operation and development of Aimhigher initiatives, and this theme will be explored with partners and key representatives of the sector.

It may be useful to reflect on the statement of William M. Banks, president of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers quoted in the Times article of October 17 2008 ‘Engineering is not just a machine, a branch of technology or an equation to be solved; it is people’. Those in the sector seeking the next IK Brunel may be in the short term disappointed, but there are, it seems, and...
fortunately for the South Yorkshire economy, many willing to continue the search.

Reflections

It is clear to see the benefits of conducting practitioner research in terms of access to the research participants and their ease in participating without suspicion of the researcher pursuing an agenda. However, given the fact that additional time is not provided for the practitioner to conduct the research it makes it much more pressurized than purely commissioning a piece of research to be conducted by an external research organisation. There is also the issue of the perception of the quality of the research from the funding bodies and other stakeholders, who may see insider research to be more influenced by the practitioner agenda, with the potential for research participants to feel restricted in speaking their true beliefs in case it impacts on the working relationship with the practitioner.

I was certain there would be little problem in eliciting opinion and I wasn’t disappointed. It is frustrating that time was limited for the exercise, and that a wider range of key players could not have their views included. However it was of some comfort to note that many of the comments expressed in the face to face interviews were similar in sentiment to those expressed on the national consultation website. This allowed me to feel more confident that the views expressed were not just related to a particular narrow viewpoint in one relatively small area of the UK, but reflected a wider national disquiet about one of the UK’s most important wealth creating sectors.

Thanks to

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References


The information, advice and guidance (IAG) needs of part-time work-based foundation degree students at Sheffield Hallam University.

Sue Fellowes, IAGTO, Sheffield Hallam University

Introduction

One of the objectives of the Higher Futures network is to ‘improve information, advice and guidance, and provide enhanced support, to ensure vocational learners and work-based learners achieve their potential’ (Higher Futures, 2007). Higher Futures fund an Information Advice Guidance and Transition Officer (IAGTO) in each of the partner institutions to provide this support. As the IAGTO at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) it is my role to deliver activities with potential Higher Education students (and others) throughout the network and offer enhanced support to those who have made the transition to SHU. Part of this role is to find out more about the information, advice and guidance (IAG) needs of the Higher Futures cohort, both pre-entry and during their HE courses. This summary report outlines an investigative project which has been designed to find out more about these needs.

Background

The Higher Futures IAGTO post is based within the Careers and Employment Service at the University. It is part of Student Learning Services (SLS) which offers a wide range of support across two campuses. Careers Advisers work with the full range of students both full and part-time as well as graduates. They also offer some pre-entry advice and guidance, although this is mainly provided by Education Guidance, a separate portfolio within SLS. The Network Employment Service provides vacancy information both for students wanting to find work during their course and graduate opportunities. Amongst other things it helps to organise careers events.

The University offers an increasing number of foundation degrees (FDs). These were first introduced in 2000, as a response to the Dearing Enquiry (Dearing, 1997) and had the aim of ‘addressing the projected requirements of the UK economy while offering a new and accessible route into Higher Education, particularly for individuals already in the workforce’.

According to the full and part-time prospectuses there are currently 10 full-time degrees and 12 part-time offered by the University. In 2004, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Service (AGCAS 2004 ) carried out an extensive survey into the IAG needs of foundation degree students aware that ‘Foundation Degree students were beginning to pose new and different challenges to its members and other practitioners’. This survey covered 27 institutions and 47 courses.

One of the main observations was that FD students are far from an homogeneous group. Based on my experience of working with a wide range of FD students I know this is equally true of SHU students.

Due to time/scope constraints a research project into the whole cohort would not be feasible. The principal aim of this project was to find out more about the IAG needs of a specific group of foundation degree students - those who are part-time and work-based. The main objective of this project was to find out more about how the Careers and Employment Service might provide an enhanced service for this student group, supporting the Higher Futures mission statement.

Research Questions

The specific research questions which I aimed to explore included:

- What can we learn about the IAG needs of part-time work-based foundation degree students, both pre-entry and during their courses, at Sheffield Hallam University?
- Are there ways of improving IAG provision at Sheffield Hallam University?

Research Design

In line with the Higher Futures priority sectors this project focused on 2 specific courses: Early Years and Sustainable Communities. The Early Years course currently has 174 students and is based in both Sheffield (96 students) and Rotherham (78 students). Classroom sessions run once weekly on different days, for different groups between around 2pm to 6.30pm. National
organisations including the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), the Training and Development Agency for Schools and the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) are encouraging the workforce to develop to FD level and on to Honours degree level and to gain Early Years Professional Status (EYPS). There is Government support available to employers to pay course fees through the Transformation Fund. There are both short and long term benefits to them of having a qualified workforce.

The Sustainable Communities course currently has 23 students across 2 years, all based at the City Campus. There is no provision for payment of course fees and no specific Government commitment to upskill the workforce. Employers are unlikely to give support either in terms of funding or time for study. While the Early Years course will be running again this year, Sustainable Communities will not due to lack of applicants.

There were 3 main reasons for choosing these two particular FDs: 1) as the IAGTO I had some contact with some of the students during a very brief induction 2) course tutors were known to me as part of the Higher Futures network and 3) they might provide different insights in terms of background and situation regarding higher education.

The initial plan was to collect data via focus groups and then to follow this with more in-depth interviews with several students. The aim was to produce a number of case studies. However, it soon became clear that focus groups would be difficult to conduct due to the very fact that these were part-time students with busy and complex lives and who had limited contact time at the University. Instead I took a rather more pragmatic approach and the data collection methods used were: a) an on-line survey to reach as many students as possible and b) semi-structured interviews with 3 students to give a more qualitative insight.

a) The on-line survey

At the start of the project, the Survey Monkey tool was used. However, this did not enable the researcher to ask the number/scope of questions required. The SHU on-line survey tool provided more flexibility and was relatively easy to use with assistance from a supportive colleague in the Higher Futures Directorate.

How were students identified and accessed?

The respective course tutors agreed to forward the link to the survey via Blackboard, their way of contacting students through SHUSPACE, the University’s on line environment. Although the initial aim of briefing all students personally before the survey went online proved difficult to organise (only a couple of groups were accessed prior to the survey), the survey was prefaced by both the aims and objectives of the survey and the practitioner researcher’s role within Higher Futures.

The survey allowed students to remain anonymous and consisted of 3 sections, as follows:

- Background (Personal details) [8 questions]
- About the course (including attendance mode/travel distance/reasons for doing/employers’ attitude [9 questions]
- IAG needs pre-entry and beyond [17 questions]

It was forwarded to course tutors and went officially live on March 27th 2009, closing on May 10th 2009.

b) Semi-structured qualitative interviews

At the end of the survey, individuals were invited to get in touch if they wanted to take part in further research. Three students agreed to take part in more in-depth qualitative interviews. Two were first year students and one was in the final year. It is of note that at same time as conducting this research I also aimed to produce a case study for Higher Futures publicity so, in addition to the 3 interviews conducted, I also interviewed a student and produced a case study for the Higher Futures website. This student was offered a retail voucher for their time and involvement in the research.

Data Analysis

The survey results were presented by the software in the form of a summary with the overall response to each individual question. However, it was possible to find out more in-depth information by doing individual searches on particular groups or questions. 45 out of a possible 197 students responded to the survey; all the respondents were from the Early Years group.
The semi-structured interviews for this investigative project were conducted by telephone and in the workplace. Although one final year student withdrew due to illness, an additional final year student interview took place at the University, following IAG referral from the Higher Futures Early Years Sector Development Officer (SDO). The data collected during the interviews were recorded and collated. The transcripts of the interviews were analysed for key themes.

Findings

The on-line survey

Although the survey was sent to both Sustainable Communities students and Early Years students, all 45 responses were from Early Years students. As highlighted earlier in this summary the 2 courses are very different and the survey may well have been just an additional pressure for the Sustainable Communities students.

In summary the 45 Early Years students who did respond were:

- all female;
- all employed (part-time 27% and full time 73%);
- 18 were Rotherham based and 27 from Sheffield;
- Ist year - 33%, 2nd year - 38%, 3rd year - 27%;
- varied in age, the largest group 26-40 (47%); 41-49 (24%), 18-25 (20%) and 50+ (9%);
- pre-entry qualifications were largely vocational at Level 3 and included; BTEC National Diploma 31%, CACHE Diploma Level 3 22%, other vocational 13%; and
- the majority 62% did the course either entirely or almost entirely in their own time.

The most popular reasons given for undertaking the course were to improve career prospects (73%), to help them do their job better (58%), to continue education (49%), to increase chances of progression with their own employer or find a better job with another employer (42%); and because they hoped it would help change career direction (11%).

In looking at the responses I was interested to see whether there were definite distinctions between those made by 1) different year groups and 2) Rotherham/ Sheffield based students. On the whole there were not, although the following is interesting to note for Rotherham based students:

- 14 named their employer, Rotherham MBC/LEA, as their main source of pre-entry IAG;
- 6 never visited the main campus; and
- 14 preferred email as their main source of IAG.

(Note: transport is now provided for these students to come across to the City Campus once a week.)

It is not possible to report all the survey responses but there were some themes which emerged during analysis that help to answer the main research questions and so are of particular interest:

Pre Entry

Sources of IAG

Employers were by far the most important source of IAG with 12 students (27%) indicating this. A further 9 students named Rotherham MBC/LEA as a source of IAG. Three (7%) had used a University Adviser/other HE Adviser and 3 the University website. Nobody accessed an FE/College Adviser.

Quality

When asked about the quality of IAG just over half (56%) of the respondents were very satisfied or satisfied. A small minority, five students (11%), indicated they were dissatisfied. Three students stated they had difficulty in accessing IAG.

Further information

When students were asked what they would have liked more information about, a small majority indicated course content (53%). Other information highlighted included: options after course (44%); transport and parking issues 14 (31%); learning and support (31%); and information about mentoring (24%).
During Course

Preferred types of IAG

When students were asked what types of IAG they thought they needed during the course, a range were selected from a list of multi-choice options. The most popular choice was Early Years Professional Status (84%) followed by: progression to level 6/degree course (78%); further study options generally (42%); career options (42%); help with completing CVs/application forms (18%); help with interview techniques (16%); and self employment (13%). Only a very small number (3 students) did not expect to require any careers advice or information.

Appointments with Careers Adviser

The majority (62%) knew how to make an appointment with a careers advisor. Nearly 30% were not sure how to do this. When asked if there were any group sessions they would like a careers advisor to run as part of their course, further study (47%) was the most popular option. Other preferred groups included: careers options (36%), CVs/application forms (20%), interview techniques (18%). A small minority, 27% were not interested in any group sessions.

Preferred time/methods of accessing IAG (Multi choice)

The majority of students indicated that they would prefer to access IAG via email (69%) and in person (53%). A minority would prefer the interactive website (27%). When asked what time they would prefer to access IAG a small majority of 25 students (56%) indicated the evening was preferable, whilst 18% would prefer weekends.

Careers Events

Just over half of the students (53%) indicated they were not interested in attending careers events and the employment service. When asked if they knew how to find out about them only 3 students (7%) indicated they did whilst 38% were not sure. Six students (13%) indicated they were not interested in careers events.

b) Semi-structured interviews

Three students, two first year students Alison and Jackie and a final year student Jenny, took part in a more in-depth qualitative interview. These provided a more personal perspective to the survey.

‘Alison’ has three children the eldest of whom is about to start A levels. She left work to become a full-time Mum but actually continued with part-time work (both paid and voluntary) which fitted around her children. She achieved a Level 3 Diploma in Pre-school Practice during this time and D32/33 Assessors Award (Early Years).

When her youngest started school in 2004, she returned to full-time work as a nursery worker in a college Nursery in Sheffield and soon found she was very keen to progress.

She started to think about Higher Education and enrolled on an Access course, but then heard about the FD in Early Years through her employers and how she could be financed through the Graduate Fund. She applied for the course, was accepted and was delighted.

Alison is the first in her family to enter Higher Education and is delighted to be a role model for her children. She is still uncertain what her next step will be. She enjoyed her assessor role and may like to develop a trainer/assessor role.

‘Jackie’ left school at 16 with GCSEs including Maths, English and Science. She had 2 children and worked in a factory for 11 years – ‘the shifts suited me’. She was made redundant in 2000, and had to rethink her career plans. She funded herself through a BTEC National Diploma in Early Years at North Notts. College (2002-2004), working nights at the local 24 hour Tesco’s. Her children were just 2 and 5 years at that time.

In 2007, she was promoted to Manager at a local NHS Hospital Nursery; her line manager felt it would benefit both her and the Nursery if she were to do the Foundation Degree at SHU. This means commuting 20 miles. Jackie is quite used to facing challenges and hopes to carry on studying and achieve Early Years Professional Status.
‘Jenny’ is 22 years old and lives on the outskirts of Sheffield. She is the first member of her family (where there has been a history of unemployment) to access Higher Education. She did a CACHE Level 3 Diploma at a Sheffield College. She started working as a Nursery Nurse but decided she wanted to ‘push herself a bit further’. She was employed in a Community Centre working with children and parents, but decided she would prefer to work in a school setting.

She got a job as a Teaching Assistant in a Sheffield school and found out about the FD in Early Years, funding herself through the first year. She took the Higher Level Teaching Assistant modules option as part of her course and her career aim is to qualify as an Early Years Teacher. However, she was confused by what options were available to her as progression routes.

During the in-depth interviews all three students were asked:

- Is there any Information Advice and Guidance would you have liked before joining the course?
- What support would have been helpful?
- What do you know about the Careers and Employment Service?
- Are there ways in which a Careers Adviser might be able to help you?

From these questions the following themes emerged:

Availability of impartial and accurate IAG

Alison and Jackie are both funded by their employers and found about the course through their respective employers. They have been well-supported but were unclear when they started the course what their longer term options might be and would have welcomed some impartial IAG at this stage.

As Jenny was self-funding the course she wanted to be absolutely sure that it would be appropriate for her longer term career aims. Her employer was happy for her to undertake the course but unable to advise on its appropriateness. She did a lot of research herself, but was not directed towards impartial IAG. She was uncertain where to find it.

Jenny was due to finish her course in the New Year. She was interested in progressing to Early Years Teaching but ‘had heard so many conflicting stories about entry requirements and study options’ that she ‘didn’t know what to think!’ and was ‘totally confused’.

She maintained there were other students equally confused about what to do next.

As a result of her separate guidance interview she was ‘going to tell other students about the help she had received’.

Alison commented that coming on the course had actually increased her options and felt an increasing need for impartial IAG.

Support

All 3 felt that it would be beneficial to be linked with a student mentor both before and during the course. This would give them more insight into what to expect, be better prepared and generally increase confidence. Jackie’s employer mentor was actually a final year student on the course and this was ‘invaluable’.

They would have all liked more information about course content before they started. It was apparent that the first year students had been able to access study support more easily than Jenny due to improvements in the flexibility/accessibility of the offer made by the Faculty’s Learning Hub.

Accessing the Careers and Employment Service/IAG

All first years had been given the Student and Learning Services concertina card in their induction pack. This gives information about all the student support services available including the Careers and Employment Service. Neither Alison nor Jackie remembered receiving these.

Students were ‘overloaded’ with information at induction, only had one day’s contact time and prioritised what they needed to know about the actual course.

Although based at SHU, none of them knew where to
find the service. Nor did they know how to find information via the student portal.

Alison said ‘I believe the majority of information is not for me’. When asked to clarify this it was because ‘it was for younger students’. None of them would have ever attended any Careers Fairs or similar events.

They all felt that they would not have time to attend such events, nor access Advice and Guidance on the days they were in University for the course. They would need to take time off work or use evenings. Jackie, who lived and worked over 15 miles away would even find this difficult. She would need to access help via email/telephone.

All three thought it would be useful to have sessions on Career/Further Study Options integrated into the course. They were all surprised that a Careers Adviser could offer support with Job Search skills e.g. interview techniques/CVs/application Forms. Jenny felt that this was more relevant on an individual basis.

Conclusions

This project set out to look at both pre- and post-entry IAG needs of part-time work-based foundation degree learners.

Pre entry

By definition, the students who took part in this Evaluation Project have made the transition into Higher Education. The survey revealed that the majority of these had received pre-entry advice from employers. As helpful as this might be, there are question marks over how impartial this might be and how up-to-date knowledge of the broader range of progression routes is.

Outside the research methods used in this project, I have carried out one-to-one guidance sessions with several Early Years workers who are keen to find out more about career and study options with their Level 3 qualifications. Referrals are made by the Sector Development Officer (SDO), Early Years. However, this has led to ‘word-of-mouth’ referrals.

Additionally, in conjunction with the SDO, an evening session was run for Level 3 workers at a local FE College. Feedback was excellent and has resulted in joining a foundation degree course other than Early Years.

Area of further research

Are there ways in which this University (and other HE providers) can work more closely with providers of part-time vocational Level 3 courses for work-based learners to offer impartial accessible IAG?

This seems of particular importance with the conclusion of the Lifelong Learning Networks at the end of the year.

Post entry

It should not be assumed that this cohort of learners does not need impartial IAG because they are already in employment. This is particularly the case where, in other sectors, there are increasing redundancies and threat of redundancy. It is very possible that some FD (and HNC/D) students may lose both a place on a course as well as a job.

Additionally, evidence from this research would suggest that FD learners have concerns around career and study options. It could be argued that they have more issues around further study than other undergraduates as they still have another step before achieving full graduate level. It is important that they understand that the Careers and Employment Service is there for them as part-time foundation degree students and the range of services it offers – not just careers advice but also help with job hunting skills, running careers events and providing access to jobs and employers.

The more in-depth interviews conducted revealed that some of the issues for them were as much about being part-time and mature as being work-based/foundation.

There appears to be no co-ordinated approach to the induction and support for either part-time or mature learners. The University used to run the Link Up Mentoring Scheme for mature students, which no longer exists. The Faculty of Development and Society is currently running a Pilot Project offering flexible modes of learning support for part-time learners. I wonder what will be learned from this?
Further Areas of Research

This project focuses on one part-time work-based foundation degree and there are several areas which could warrant further research including:

- Find out more about IAG needs of SHU foundation degree students generally
- What induction programmes already exist across the University for part-time and mature learners?
- What mentoring schemes are currently available at SHU? How can mature learners access these? Or should there be specialist provision?
- There are more questions to ask the Rotherham cohort (and any other ‘remote’ SHU courses) in terms of how well the Student and Learning Support services meets their needs. Is delivery flexible enough?
- The Vice-Chancellor wants Sheffield Hallam University ‘to provide an outstanding student experience’. The Improving the Student Experience Group (ISEG) are looking at 6 key areas including student engagement and student experience. It is important that this group examines these in relation to the whole student cohort.

References


Learning from Adult Students: Inclusion, Flexibility and Blended Learning

Dr Anita Franklin, Programme Director for the Foundation Degree and MA in Working with Communities, the Institute of Lifelong Learning
University of Sheffield

In this brief paper I want to share with other educators some ideas that have crystallized for me in the wake of my work as Course Leader for the Working With Communities Programme (WWC) at the University of Sheffield (Franklin 2010). Being the first foundation degree at this Yorkshire-based Russell Group University, my colleagues and I have learned a great deal about the challenges of asking older institutions to behave in new ways.

A Challenging Context

It is becoming widely acknowledged by educationalists such as Scott (1995), Trow (2000), and Martin (2003) that universities must change if they are to be seen as contributing to their own economic sustainability. In the popular press, Guardian writer Simon Jenkins has painted a very medieval picture of academic life (Guardian, Thurs 11 June 2009). His account is of a life that is centred on research and is full of long holidays. Some people's lives are like that. On the other hand many of us cannot find the time to take the holidays that are due to us as we teach through most of the summer. And some others use those days to write and publish, bringing in much needed funding.

On the other hand Jenkins and others in the specialist educational press as represented by for example, the Leader article in the Times Higher Education (10 September 2009), are right to question the continuing research bias of UK universities. The undervaluing of teaching is embedded in UK academic culture. As we continue to re-imagine universities that can participate meaningfully in partnerships with industry as envisaged in the government’s vision of foundation degrees (FDs) (DFES (2003). DFES (2004), we will also need to know how best to raise skills among students who are not as academically prepared as those who come to us with the best A level qualifications.

If the UK is to meet the targets set out in the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) where by the year 2020, 40% of the adult population is in possession of Level 4 qualifications and above, significant changes in universities' practices will need to be made. Our pedagogy and institutions will need to accommodate traditionally excluded populations and to inspire learning among those who have never found education inspiring before. If universities are to become a part of regeneration and community development, not simply a body rewarding those who research about it, then higher education teaching will need to be given serious consideration and will need to be rewarded fairly.

Increasingly universities will need to provide flexible courses to meet the needs of a student population who work full or part time. Part time study could become more of an option for students given the prospect of sharp increases in fees and the dark spectre of heavy loans. As we look to create a more inclusive university culture it seems imperative that we look at how these changes are impacting on educators.

The Case Study

In this discussion I am concerned to trace how the WWC course has changed my teaching. It has had to become more inclusive, more flexible and make use of a blended pedagogy.

The Working With Communities Programme (WWC) started as a four year course aimed at adults from non-traditional backgrounds with experience as community workers; initially, it was conceived and designed outside and prior to our involvement with Higher Futures. As the programme is in part work-based, students had to be employed or volunteering in the field of community work before they could come onto the course. Since the course’s inception in 2006 I have worked with approximately 80 learners from various parts of the city and region.

Very early on it was apparent to me that our WWC students would be very different not only from the norm of the student body at the university of Sheffield, but also very different from the norm of our traditional adult learners. The former tend to be young, middle class, white, UCAS recruits possessing several high A level results. Prior to the introduction of new restrictions on funding which prevents us from recruiting among those...
with Equivalent Level Qualifications, (House of Commons, March 2008) our adult learners tended to be middle class, white and often in possession of some previous tertiary education experience.

Distinct from both groups - both of which I have taught in the past - the Working With Communities group has included a large proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds, all from parts of the city that have been undergoing regeneration as a response to long term deprivation and, in the first three years at least, 90% female.

In so far as it is the aim of Higher Futures to bring more students into HE who otherwise would not be there, then it’s important for practitioners such as myself to document the ways in which we must learn from such students so that widening participation is not simply a short-term experiment but an ongoing process that can ultimately create a more inclusive and representative student (and staff) body across Higher Education institutions in the UK.

Educators can learn from students in a variety of ways. The same way those of us who are engaged in teaching often use of the work of Moon (2004) to help us teach the value of reflection to our students, we too can and do change in response to our reflections on our experience.

With only a minimum of sensitivity, we as educators can learn from our interactions, and our observations of students. We learn from assessments, student comments and results, module evaluations, extension applications. Since the course’s inception in 2006, WWC students have been surveyed a number of times and indeed many students have expressed concern about the number and nature of surveys they have been asked to complete. They wonder at the surveillance. Because of my sensitivity to this criticism I have not asked the students for any input to this narrative. I have learned that students quite quickly learn the value of analysis and are able to critique and consciously resist certain kinds of intrusive institutional demands.

In addition to these methods I have also introduced a new method of learning about the student journey. This has come about via the use I make of a short research module to supplement my understanding of the students’ experiences of teaching and learning on the course.

The module is titled Doing Projects That Make A Difference and it is taught at level 2 for 10 credits, and represents about 25 hours of contact time, in class and tutorials. By the time the students take this module they have been in the institution for about 2 years part time and as such will be well familiar with the course and the support services that are on offer. I use this module to assess students’ ability to practice various research skills that they have acquired within the course. At the same time I also ask that they use the module to find out about student experience of the course for the purpose of improving student experience of the course in the future.

I have found this module to be a more useful technique for improving the course than student evaluations, for example. In the case of Doing Projects That Make A Difference, students decide which questions to ask and therefore prioritize their own experiences, recurring issues and ideas for change.

In the end there were 3 main areas that were flagged up as a result of the research students did among themselves about their experience of the course. The overall issue they agreed to research among themselves related to barriers to higher education.

1. Students expressed the view that the main barrier was age. Friends and families in their communities often expressed the view that the learner was too old to be going to school, etc. As a result students felt that they had to be very circumspect talking to others about their studies and often had to let go of certain relationships that were not supportive.

2. The next barrier identified was lack of affordable and accessible childcare at the University. Learners who were mothers found the crèche full or too expensive to use. Forms for application for financial assistance were seen to be demeaning and too intrusive personally. Students often helped each other to find suitable child care. My own observation was that issues around parental and elder care were much more difficult to surmount and that we lost students on account of these issues.
3. The third barrier was inadequate employer support. The vast majority of students are funding themselves and are not given much time from work to attend class and do the necessary study to support learning. Students have used their annual leave in order to attend classes, even though the course clearly related to the position the students held in their community organisations.

The issue of employers’ lack of support has been felt most strongly in the progression between FD and BA degree. Studying the reasons successful FD graduates gave for not continuing their studies onto the level 3 BA part of the programme, most cited lack of employer support in relation to time. This small-scale finding is in keeping with other research about progression from Foundation to BA in the UK (Dodgson and Whitham, 2003) and (Gorard et al, 2006).

Implications for Change

If we are committed to inclusion and mass access to higher education these findings suggest that there remains a lot more room for reform.

In relation to barriers around age, it has been possible to improve our induction activities to include more events relevant to and organised by and for mature students. But that is after students have already joined us! While we can strengthen mature students’ identities once they have come onto a course, the truth is adults are still battling cultural barriers concerning the suitability of education for anyone over a certain age. Universities alone cannot transform cultural norms. In my own personal experience in the sector I have witnessed how the introduction of tuition fees has sent mature students home, many seeking out second jobs in order to help their teenage offspring to attend university.

Most of our mature students are women under the age of 35 who have young children and who work part-time. In addition to communities, families and friends often being sceptical of their abilities due to age, these women are also entering a university culture which has not yet recognized parental responsibilities as a possible element in a student’s life. It is not simply a case of trying to find childcare for class times, but also finding child care for study time, for the time needed to visit the library, for example. Children are not allowed in to the university libraries, due to insurance restrictions. And yet we who teach in adult education know that returning to education is one of the most economically and socially helpful experiences that can happen to mothers, with especially positive spill over effects on the lives of their children (Schuller and Watson, 2009). The university of the future will find itself having to compete for students in relation to many factors, one of which will be its family friendliness, measured for example, in terms of its creche availability. In the meantime our course, unlike the bulk of our adult learning courses, is held during the day, the preference of those women active in the community who come onto the course.

FDs are intended to meet employer needs for higher-level skills in the workplace (DFES 2003). There is every indication that this happening in relation to the WWC course. Students are reporting that their work lives are changing for the better. They are being given more responsibility, pay rises, and permanent contracts within only a year of being on the course. Some have been able to move from one position to another even in difficult times, enjoying significant pay increases (Franklin, 2010). However, with this success comes a new problem, discontinuation of support to do the degree, especially the top-year which allows students to complete a BA honours.

Already on my course 60 of the 120 credits at the BA level 3 are delivered primarily online. This is to accommodate the needs of students who wish to continue their studies in spite of their employers’ lack of support.

And so we are left with a very old and very intractable problem. And that is the vexed issue of how to manage the relationship between employers and education. Throughout the 1980’s a bewildering array of policies and projects sought to shape secondary education in the interests of employers (Wellington, 1993). It may be that the next decade will see many more employer-centred initiatives in education, only this time set in universities.

In conclusion, the use of blended and flexible learning to promote inclusion among adult learners in higher education is proceeding in line with various policy directives. Learning from the learners themselves and being attentive to the various ways they can alert us to the challenges they face takes time and effort and is best
done within the context of teaching that is valued and rewarded for innovations beyond the use of technology. The role of the course teachers and the course secretary figures strongly among groups previously excluded from higher education, in the sense that the pastoral relationship is very important and can be a ‘deal-breaker’ if they get it wrong.

Reflecting on their own student journey to and through the WWC course, students identified 3 main barriers to their fullest engagement with higher education. These were prejudice around age, lack of childcare and lack of employer support. With these insights I am able to create a classroom environment whereby these issues are explored and action taken, individually and collectively, to minimize the effects of the barriers. There are of course limits to what any one programme can do to minimize entrenched cultural and structural barriers from the marginalized position of adult education. Imagine the possibilities if the tertiary sector were united in its efforts to build inclusion, flexibility and blended learning to those who would benefit most.

Postscript

Since writing the article, the General Election in May 2010 has brought many political and budgetary changes that have radically altered the landscape of tertiary education. We have yet to see how the Conservative-Liberal Democratic Coalition will view adult education, but the omens are bleak. Previous commitments to increasing participation in HE have been jettisoned. On the other hand there is some indication that there may be an intensification in the role of business and industry in higher education (THES, July 15th 2010). Certainly what is clear from research among my students is that for students from 2006-2008, the overall results of the student journey module demonstrated that 3 cohorts of students were able to move on to better jobs as a result of being on the course. The most recent results show that the economic downturn has hit the public sector and the voluntary sector most dramatically. Indeed students that entered the programme in Autumn 2009 are being forced off the course as redundancies have set in since early 2010. For the time being much work with neighbourhoods, families and community organisations has been put on hold, at least until the Coalition sets out its plans for what has been dubbed the ‘Big Society’.

References

Times Higher Education Supplement, ‘Just who are you here for?’ 10 September 2009, p.5
The impact of the Higher Futures Programme on the progression and transition into higher education of Northern College Diploma Students

Derek Freeborn, Head of Student Services, Northern College
Tom Spreyer, Tutor, Northern College

Introduction

Northern College is a residential adult education college located in Wentworth castle, on the outskirts of Barnsley. Its mission is to ‘provide opportunities for the transformation of individuals and communities and promote social change through the provision of outstanding adult residential and community based learning’. The largest single course offered at Northern is the ‘Northern College Diploma’. This course, which is mapped to OCN level 3, is a standalone qualification but also an access course to higher education.

The Higher Futures (HF) Programme works with Northern College to encourage and facilitate students to make the transition to higher education. Throughout the academic year, a programme of IAG seminars, talks, visits and one to one guidance were offered to Diploma students to make them aware of HE opportunities and to support their transition into university.

Both the content and methods of delivery of the programme have a great effect on its success, and must be judged according to students’ views on whether the programme benefitted them.

Background

This piece of practitioner research, undertaken by the Head of Student Services and one of the college’s tutors, aimed at assessing the impact of the HF programme on current and past Northern College Diploma students’ decisions about whether to continue into higher education. To continue to improve and serve the needs of students, it is important to assess which aspects of the HF programme students believe are the most and least valuable. Using this data, Northern College hope to gain recommendations for improving the delivery of the HF programme within Northern College.

Research Questions

- What was the most useful element of the HF programme?
- What was the least useful element?
- Has/did the HF Programme play a major part in influencing your choice to go on to higher education?
- In what way has HF benefitted you?
- What have been the biggest barriers that you have had to overcome in returning to education?
- What extra help would you like to have that you didn’t get?

The Sample

The sample group was made up of six current Diploma students and three past students from 2007/8. All were adult learners although there was a large age spread, from approximately 25 – 45. The sample consisted of five women and four men. All participants were ‘White British’ (the Diploma cohort in 2008/9 was 95% White British).

Research design (including data collection methods)

The goal of the research was to collect current and former Northern College diploma students’ qualitative assessments of the HF programme as it had benefitted them. Research design was therefore guided by the need to collect worthwhile qualitative data. It was decided that the best way to gain more in depth responses in the timescale was via a focus group.

The focus group was run in the early evening to catch current students after classes but also to enable past students to participate after their working day. A buffet was provided upon arrival. The focus group began with a recap of what the HF programme had included.

A semi-structured format was used in the focus group. It was chaired by a practitioner who posed the research questions and then allowed students to speak freely about their experiences of the HF programme. On a couple of occasions, students were prompted or asked supplementary questions to keep conversation moving.
However, for the most part, the content of the discussion around each research question was student led.

The focus group was recorded on two iPods fitted with microphones. A learning support practitioner also recorded the group on paper. The iPods were placed at opposite ends of the table; this proved valuable as, for the most part, when one was unworkably muffled the other was more easily decipherable.

**Ethical considerations**

Practitioners reflected on the effect of their presence at the group. It was decided that the Head of Student Services, who delivers the Higher Futures programme at Northern College, should not be present. Instead, a Northern College tutor who was also a participant in the HF practitioner research network facilitated the group; it was reasoned that he was suitably informed to steer discussion, but not so close to the programme that participants’ responses would be modified.

**Data analysis**

The written notes of the focus group were transcribed, anonymised and passed to the Head of Student Services and the college tutor for analysis and writing up. The research findings, below, have been grouped according to the research questions.

**Findings**

1. **What was the most useful element of the HF programme?**

   All participants commented that the HF programme had provided the necessary stimulation to apply and progress to university. Some participants noted that it was particularly valuable for students who knew at the onset that university was to be their next step. The HF programme proved very useful when completing the UCAS application form. However, it was also helpful for participants who hadn’t previously considered higher education as an option, as illustrated by this following quote:

   ‘I never intended to go to university, takes me a while to even think about things, mentioning it early on got the cogs turning, it was gradual, thinking of university, I have applied.’

2. **What was the least useful element?**

   This question proved unexpectedly valuable. Participants did not see a particular element of the HF programme as being less useful, but commented that the timing of the programme was a disadvantage.

   The HF programme was introduced during the 4 week Academic Skills module at the beginning of the academic year, when students have a heavy schedule of work. It was thought that it would be more advantageous if students were given a brief introduction to the programme at the beginning of the 4 weeks and then a more in-depth session at the end.

   Participants noted that if the presentation was given at a later date, students would perhaps be more aware of what was being offered and what questions to ask. It was also suggested that it may be a good idea to speak to a career advisor at the beginning of the Academic Skills module.

3. **Has the HF Programme played a major part in influencing your choice to go onto Higher Education?**

   The general feeling of the group was that it did have a major impact. It made students think and focus on the benefits of further study as well as the possibilities open to them to achieve this.

   There was consensus that the support and guidance received from the College had given the students confidence that they didn’t have at the start of the Diploma. The HF programme was thought to be very valuable in helping to define goals and routes, and to help show how Higher Education was both necessary and possible in the process.

   The issue of timing was mentioned again with one participant reflecting that the programme had been ‘too much too soon’.
4. In what way has HF benefitted you?

Discussion around this research question echoed those in response to research questions 1 and 3.

In general, the HF programme was seen as encouraging students to give serious thought to moving on to university. For some of the participants at the focus group, this had not been a consideration at the start of the Diploma, as illustrated by this following dialogue:

‘About going to university, when I first came I was coming to get my Diploma and was not thinking university, now I’ve decided to go to university.’

‘What changed your mind?’

‘I think increase in confidence really, both during the programme with Derek and speaking to xxxx, I found something that I could be really good at.’

5. What have been the biggest barriers that you have had to overcome in returning to education?

The two common barriers discussed were financial constraints and personal circumstances, most notably self belief. There were also comments that are very valuable to the widening participation agenda: some participants perceived that family and friends did not understand the value of higher education and argued that it was not appropriate for someone of their background. Clearly, this can be a very powerful barrier.

It seems that the level of support helped students to overcome the barriers:

‘I think the main thing is that people here, I don’t know what it is about them they just build you up so much they make you feel like you can do it. I know that I wouldn’t have been able to go to university without this behind because I would have thought I can’t do this and pack it in, but all I can think of is that they said I could do this at Northern College, it keeps you going, it is completely different at university, you haven’t got people behind you like you have here, people like Derek as well.’

‘There is a lot of support.’

‘Far greater than you would get elsewhere.’

Sometimes personal circumstances were an incentive rather than a barrier to progress within education, as illustrated below:

‘The factors that influence, I had to change because of circumstances with our two grand-daughters. I should have retired the year I came to college, but because of the circumstances involving them, and having to be their guardians, I’m now going to have to work until come mid 60s and I needed to retrain and do something else, that I can do for the next 10 years and this was the place that gave me the opportunity to do that.’

6. What extra help would you like to have had that you didn’t get?

All participants agreed that there is great value in practical examples. They felt that they would have benefitted from former Diploma students coming to college to give insights into what to expect from Higher Education and how they achieved, including what problems they encountered. Moreover, all agreed that an account of how gaining the Northern College Diploma helped them to progress to Higher Education and ultimately gain employment in their desired field would have been extremely good.

Conclusions

The first conclusion to be drawn from the research is that data provided by this small-scale practitioner research project suggests that the Higher Futures programme is a much needed, valuable resource at Northern College. The programme of HF activities is extremely popular amongst the Diploma students who took part in the focus group. It has had a positive impact on students progressing onto Higher Education, to the extent that many participants believed that they would not otherwise have made the transition.

The second conclusion and consequent recommendation is around the pattern of delivery. It was thought that it would be more beneficial to have a full day or a couple of half days dealing with the Higher Education programme rather than the two hour sessions that were given over the four week Academic Skills module at the beginning of the year. More specifically, participants
agreed that an outline of higher education should be given at the beginning of the Academic Skills sessions and then, when students are more familiar with the academic workload, for higher education to be introduced in-depth, at a later date.

The third conclusion relates to the question ‘What extra help would you like to have had that you didn’t get?’ The participants said that they would have liked to have talked to former students and could have benefitted from this. In fact a number of sessions were arranged where former students were invited to talk about their own experience. However, it seems that none of the focus group participants were aware of this, and so in future the marketing will need to be much better to ensure that the message gets across.

Reflections

This piece of research would have benefitted from a wider preliminary reading of the existing research in this area but time was not permitting.

Tasking Tom Spreyer, a college tutor, instead of Derek Freeborn to conduct the focus group proved to have been a good move. In his capacity as Head of Student Services, Derek may have become defensive about some of the comments that were made, such as the use of former students. Tom ensured that participants could feel more comfortable in voicing their opinions.

With hindsight it might have been better to have run 2 focus groups, one for current and one for ex-students, as they may have had different perceptions.
Assessing the effectiveness of the Parents Forum at Longley Park College

Ali Ghalib, Academic Development Manager, Longley Park 6th Form College

Introduction

This summary report outlines an investigative research project designed to measure the impact of an ongoing Aimhigher intervention at a sixth form college opened in 2004. The Longley Park College Parents Forum has been running since 2005 with the objective of engaging parents and families with no previous higher education (HE) experience and further developing channels of communication with the local community.

The practitioner researcher’s role in setting up the forum involved (initially) working with Sheffield Futures in assessing whether the demand from parents was there and deciding on the format of the evenings. Interest was determined by sending out letters through tutor groups and adverts at the college; the success of the event meant that it became embedded in the college’s action plan.

The parent’s forum is a termly event where families of level 3 learners are invited into the college to help raise awareness, aspirations and give information, advice and guidance to parents in relation to progression to HE. Each forum includes a guest speaker who has expertise in a particular area; for the duration of this project, representatives from both Sheffield University and Sheffield Hallam University delivered information about UCAS and Financial support.

This project adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the impact of these sessions. The research took place between October 2008 and September 2009.

Background

Longley Park is an open access Widening Participation Sixth Form College that recruits many of its students from Excellence in Cities areas and from non-traditional higher education backgrounds. Target groups for interventions include 13-19 year olds in education or training who come from areas of disadvantage based on the Index of Multiple deprivation; who live in areas of low HE participation as measured by POLAR 2 and from households which fall into socio-economic groups 4-8 (Source: National Statistics classification).

Aimhigher is a national programme which aims to widen participation in HE by raising the aspirations and developing the abilities of young people from under-represented groups. The Government has set a target that by the year 2010, 50 per cent of those aged between 18 and 30 should have the opportunity to benefit from higher education.

The situation in Sheffield before the college opened in 2004 was as follows:

- Sheffield ranked 116/154 LEA’s in terms of its 18 year olds going into HE (2003) 18% vs. national average 21.6%
- Brightside (David Blunkett’s constituency) sent 8% to HE compared with Hallam 62% which is less than 4 miles away
- 90% of UCAS applicants/acceptances from Sheffield came from white students even though BME make up 13% of Y11 Population

(Source: Aimhigher practitioner’s website 2005)

Within this context, Longley Park was opened as a WP (widening participation) sixth form college. Although the majority of students come from seven partner schools all from the North East of Sheffield, a minority travel from across Sheffield. A formal ceremony was held in December 2004 and the college was officially opened by then Prime Minister Tony Blair and David Blunkett, within whose Brightside constituency the college is located.

Research questions

Key research questions included:

What has been the impact of the Longley Park Parents Forum on the students and families who participated?

Has the forum enhanced parents’ understanding of the
procedures for getting into Higher Education?

Has the forum enhanced parents’ capacity to encourage and support their son/daughter to get to university?

Research design (including data collection methods)

Two different types of data collection were employed. The first involved questionnaires given out at each of the evenings which aimed to explore the impact of that particular session. The second involved a small number of semi structured interviews. These aimed to explore in more detail families’ understanding of procedures for getting into HE and their capacity to encourage and support their son/daughter to get to university.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were given out to parents and students who attended parent forum evenings in October 2008 and April 2009. The first of these looked at parents’ existing knowledge and awareness of HE and the results from this were used as a baseline measure when evaluating the evenings. Both questionnaires were handed out at the end of the sessions; they focused on measuring the effectiveness of that particular session, one on the UCAS application process and the second on financial support for those going to higher education.

A mixture of closed and short answer questions were used to gather data about the following four themes:

1. How the college supports students applying to university
2. How and when to apply to university
3. Finance at university (loans grants etc)
4. Choices (what and where to study)

For each of these themes, parents were asked to rate their knowledge of the topic area according to the following ratings:

- Not much
- Quite a lot
- Lots

- Interviews

All parents who attended the evenings were contacted by e-mail to explore who might want to take part in further research. These parents were to be interviewed on a one-to-one basis to provide more in-depth qualitative data. Interviews were carried out in August and September 2009. The ethical protocol was handed out to all these parents.

Interviews were arranged with 3 parents who had attended both evenings and these took place at the college. Each interview lasted about 15 minutes and was recorded and fully transcribed later. Open ended questions were used to gather qualitative data exploring the following themes: family background; educational highs and lows; the Longley Park Parents Forum; and parents’ suggestions for future support.

Data analysis

This began with an analysis of the questionnaires from both evenings which had been completed by 19 parents. The interviews were then transcribed and analysed for common themes and coding units were drawn up. Quotes were identified which related to each of these themes and cross links with the quantitative data were referenced to see if any clear patterns emerged. Colleagues were also used to help check interpretations as a secondary analysis to help firm up inter rater reliability.

It is important to note that, although the practitioner researcher tried to conduct the 3 interviews using a standardised approach, only the data produced from one of the interviews proved to be in sufficient depth to warrant further analysis for the purpose of this research. Therefore it was decided to produce one case study from the data gathered in this interview.

Findings

Questionnaires

How the college supports students applying to university

As a result of attending the sessions, 10 (52%) parents believed they knew quite a lot more about how the college can support students applying to university; 8
(42%) reported that they knew a bit more and 1 (5%) felt they knew not much more.

How and when to apply to university

As a result of attending the sessions, 11 (57%) believed they knew quite a lot more about how and when to apply to university and 8 (42%) knew a bit more.

Finance at university

As a result of attending the sessions:

- 13 (68%) believed they knew a bit more about finance at university, particularly loans and grants; 4 (21%) knew quite a lot more and only 2 (10%) not much more
- 10 (52%) believed they now knew a bit more about choices in terms of what and where to study; 5 (26%) knew quite a lot more and 4 (21%) not much more
- 12 (63%) enjoyed the evenings a great deal and 7 (36%) reported that they had enjoyed the evenings.

Choices

12 parents (63%) felt their understanding about HE had increased and that the evenings had inspired them to greater involvement with their child’s application.

The questionnaire also sought parents’ views more generally about the Parents Forum; 100% said that their overall impression of the evenings had been ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ and reported that there should be more events like this to raise awareness of college life. It is worth noting that 13 (68%) of those who attended had children who were the first to apply to HE in their respective families. One parent wrote:

“Very informative, would like to attend other events; more information about open days please; perhaps a parent could share their experiences around finance etc”

Case Study

The context of the case study is as follows. Catherine is White British, in her late 30’s, married with two children. Beth is the eldest of these and is the first in the family to aim to go to university. Her mother describes Beth as having had a difficult childhood and being bullied at school. However this did not put Beth off education, but had the reverse effect in that she may have used education and learning as a security blanket when her peers chose to hang around on street corners.

From the interview with Catherine the following themes emerged:

Financial implications of HE

Catherine had not gone to university herself but instead had prioritised earning through paid employment -

“I left school with good GCSE’s had a place at Loxley college and had a part time job at a supermarket and they wanted to take me on and they offered me £97 a week which was back in 1988 and so the money won the education unfortunately”.

Her pre-conceived ideas about the financial implications of going to university were challenged in a positive way by the Forum sessions:

“I found them very informative because I haven’t been to university myself, from a funding point of view I expected it being pay out, pay out, pay out, and the evening that I came on showed those people who haven’t get a university background, showed them how easy it is for a child to get in if funding is a problem. It shows them how there are other ways that they can fund that.”

Confidence

As a result of attending the Parents Forum, Catherine reported more confidence to talk to her daughter about applying to HE:

A - How did Beth feel about you coming to the sessions and you having raised awareness did you feel it was good for her?

C - Yes definitely, because I knew what she is talking about rather then saying yes, yes, yes, I could say oh yes
we have talked about that funding we’ve talked about the percentages that you have to pay back, yes I think it’s a really good idea.

Catherine also felt more confident in talking to her partner:

‘Yes and when I went back and told my husband he was more for it because obviously I was giving him the understanding that it wasn’t hard, it wasn’t going to come out of the bank, this is what was going to happen this is what we had to do, so through greater understanding it probably encouraged Beth even more.’

Broadening Horizons

Catherine saw the change in Beth’s view of other universities and talked passionately about the impact of her daughter’s Aimhigher residential to Cambridge (it is interesting to note that Beth’s application to the Cambridge residential came a month after the second Longley Park Parents Forum).

Catherine knew that her daughter wanted to go to university but was unsure of choice. However, upon return from the Cambridge residential, Beth was so impressed by the four days at Cambridge that

‘she came back buzzing about wanting to go to Cambridge and it stopped her from being scared, she realised there were other universities out there even though she’s gone to Sheffield, she was aware she could go to other universities’

Also on the subject of the impact of the college’s Aimhigher activities, Catherine said ‘you show them the path to go on, what would happen, this is what other universities are like etc rather just getting on a bus and going to a university within their area’.

College support for the student

Catherine commented positively on the pastoral side of the college’s support programme, saying that she was

‘Very happy from the moment that Rebecca said she was coming to Longley, at the open evening everyone was really friendly that gave Rebecca confidence definitely, during the six weeks holidays I think it’s a long time where kids can lack confidence about where they’re going to go but there were little post cards sent and little message sent and I think that encouraged her even more and gave her more confidence on her first day here’.

Impact of taking part in the research

As is the case in projects like this, some parents responded positively to the extra interest and attention given to them. The process of taking part in the interview made Catherine think back to her own education and she seems to have wanted the best for her daughter; Catherine clearly regretted not having gone to university herself. In fact taking part in the research project seems to have had a motivating effect on a number of the parents interviewed, in terms of increasing awareness that the college has quality processes to ensure that students’ needs and requirements always come first. In this respect it made parents understand that they are not alone in wanting the best for their children; that the college is working to help them; and that what they need has an importance reflected in the college’s mission statement.

Conclusion

The qualitative and quantitative data collected during the research seems to suggest that the Parents’ Forum has had a positive impact upon students and their families at Longley Park College in terms of progression to higher education and that, by doing this, it is also making a difference to the local community. Within an informal and friendly environment the capacity of the parents to support their sons and daughters to progress to higher education has been strengthened and young people have been encouraged to stretch their potential.

Dissemination

The evidence described in this report will be presented to the college management team and governors. Dissemination takes place to all staff and students in a number of ways. These include reports to CMT, Aimhigher agenda items at regular directorate meetings, Aimhigher staff development workshops at INSET and general student feedback.
The idea is to ‘embed’ as many activities as possible into the college’s quality improvement plan. Aimhigher has always been included in the colleges Self Assessment Review and effective employment of its funds is an annual key objective. This way it’s hoped that a number of activities that have been effective will continue.

**Being involved in action research**

Being involved in this research has been a valuable experience in terms of both personal and professional development. Designing questions and transcribing interviews has brought an element of real life practice next to the theory taught on a day to day basis in my A level classes. Keeping and updating a log sheet has promoted my reflective practice and proved more beneficial than first thought. Interviewing parents proved to be a highlight and discovering personal themes and issues gave a real insight into what today’s learners bring with them to post 16 education.

The project did present challenges in terms of time and other unforeseen issues. The attendance at the second parent’s forum was lower than expected and meant having to organise the one to one interviews at a faster pace than liked. The college’s very first OfSted inspection also landed right in the middle of the peak time for the project.

At an institutional level the project has benefited the whole college by:

- Parents reporting increased positive attitudes and aspirations towards HE, through evaluation after events and at parent’s consultation evenings.
- Further developing channels of communication with the local community.
- Increased awareness of higher education including vocational routes.
- Improvement in the level of involvement, and positive attitudes, among a range of other key people including school and college senior leadership groups, HE admissions tutors, parents and employers.

For the parents and families themselves being involved in the project was an opportunity to bring much valued experiences and knowledge from the local community to the college. This served to highlight and increase my knowledge of the current social and political situation in North East Sheffield which was invaluable.
Non-progression to HE among Level 3 Early Years students

Laura Gibbons, IAG and Transition Officer, Longley Park 6th Form College, Sheffield

Introduction

This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons for non-progression to higher education amongst vocational Early Years students (on a CACHE Diploma programme). Current government policies surrounding progression to higher education focus on the need to widen participation amongst traditionally under-represented groups, such as students possessing/working towards vocational A level and equivalent qualification. This is put into practice through projects within further and higher education institutions such as the Higher Futures Lifelong Learning Network. Furthermore, current government policies surrounding the Early Years sector call for increased numbers of graduates working in the area in a bid to professionalise the workforce (CWDC website: 2009).

Background

The research took place at Longley Park Sixth Form College involving second year CACHE Diploma students and was carried out by the Information, Advice and Guidance Officer at the College as part of the Higher Futures project. Longley Park Sixth Form College is a widening participation college, which aims to raise aspirations and broaden horizons. The College is based in North East Sheffield, an area which has traditionally low levels of participation in further and higher education. Since opening in 2004, just over 800 students have progressed to higher education from Longley Park, with the first cohort graduating in June 2009. Over 60% of all College students to progress to higher education have gone on to attend universities within the city, indicating a strong trend towards favouring locally based provision.

Early Years students at Longley Park are a target group within the Higher Futures project, through which they receive intensive support with higher education choices and applications. However, despite this work, and students being aware of the increasing demand for graduates in the Early Years sector, 45% of the CACHE diploma second year cohort did not apply to higher education in the 2008-09 cycle. Nevertheless, this represented an increase on the amount of applications from the previous year, indicating that perhaps the Higher Futures project had started to have an impact. The students who did apply in the 2008-09 were highly successful in gaining places, with several students achieving places on the competitive Early Years Teaching degree courses.

In terms of previous work relating to this topic, there is a wealth of existing research regarding issues concerned with widening participation to higher education in general, and some more specific examples which relate to the issues linked to widening participation amongst Early Years students. Two of the most relevant studies, carried out by Bingham and O’Hara in 2004 and 2007, focused on widening participation to Early Years degrees at Sheffield Hallam University. In their two studies, Bingham and O’Hara (2004 and 2007) concluded that the three key drivers behind participation in higher education were family background, student finance concerns and worries regarding academic skills and pastoral support. In their studies, Bingham and O’Hara were specifically referring to HNC/HND students progressing to full degrees, but it is interesting to consider whether the key themes uncovered are reflected in the findings of this project working with level 3 students considering progression to higher education. This will be discussed in more detail subsequently in the report.

Another relevant piece of research is that conducted by Heath, Fuller and Paton (2007) at the University of Southampton. This work focused on how social networks influence decision-making with regard to higher education, with emphasis on people who have the entry qualifications to access higher education but have chosen not to do so. In this regard, it is interesting to note how the findings of Heath et al (2007) compare with the findings of this research. Do the non-participating students in this project share similar views of the influence of social networks, for example family and friends? Furthermore, the Heath et al research has useful findings from a methodological perspective. Heath et al note that many projects focusing on issues surrounding widening participation involve participants who have actually accessed higher education, despite the barriers they may face. They point out that this may be due...
to the difficulties of accessing people not in the formal education system, but clearly this is a methodological challenge. Thus, the findings of Heath et al have been important in terms of the planning of this project and the decisions made in terms of participant involvement in the research.

Research Questions

The main focus of the project was to answer the following questions:

What are the main reasons why CACHE Diploma students decide not to apply to higher education?

How do these compare to the views of CACHE Diploma students who do decide to progress to higher education?

Research Design

The research design evolved significantly over the course of this project in response to several key factors. Originally, second year CACHE Diploma students in the 2008-09 cohort received a briefing about the research within class, and were given an information sheet about the project. Second year students were chosen as they were the ones who would have already made their decisions with regard to progression to higher education, whereas first year students would perhaps have still been quite unsure about their choices. Following this, they were asked to participate in a questionnaire to gauge potential reasons for non-progression to higher education and also to find out information about the choices of students who had decided to apply to university, for example their choices of institution and course. The questionnaire was also designed to ascertain students’ level of awareness of the introduction of Early Years Professional Status. Students who agreed to participate also engaged in a group session where they worked together in small teams to generate ideas of why they chose to apply/not apply to university. Teams were predominantly a mix of students who were applying and students who weren’t to capture the reasons for progression and non-progression. Following the initial analysis of the questionnaire and group activity responses, the students were again briefed to inform them of the next stage of the research – individual interviews - and to ask for volunteers to be interviewed. However, it was found that students were reluctant to participate in an individual interview, so the research design was modified to incorporate a focus group as the second stage of the research as an alternative.

Therefore, as the second stage of the project, several members of the second year CACHE Diploma 2009-10 cohort were asked to participate in a focus group. Several of these individuals were identified by the group teacher as being students who would perhaps be willing to participate and some were chosen through random selection from a group who identified themselves as being non-university applicants. The students identified by staff were then approached individually and invited to participate. Similarly, the students selected at random were asked in class if they would like to take part. In order to ensure that the focus group did not unintentionally reinforce negative stereotypes with regard to non-applicants to higher education, the design of the focus group was carefully constructed to ensure that no negative assumptions were created within the group with regard to choice surrounding progression to higher education. For this reason, the initial group of potential participants consisted of a mix of students in terms of their intended progression routes. In total, 8 students were invited to take part (3 applicants and 5 non-applicants). Of these, 5 agreed to participate (3 applicants and 2 non-applicants), 2 were unable to attend due to prior commitments and 1 declined the invitation. Of those who accepted the invitation to participate, only 2 students attended (both university applicants). One of the students who was unable to attend due to prior commitments took part in an individual discussion at an alternative time. Several of the students who had agreed to participate were given a reminder on the day of the focus group, but two of these still failed to attend (both non-applicants).

The students who did attend were asked a series of questions based around key themes which emerged from both the questionnaire results and also the background research, such as the influence of family and friends on the decision making process and the key advantages/disadvantages they perceived with regard to progression to higher education. The approach taken was semi-structured; this allowed some flexibility in response to the various directions the discussion might take. The student who participated in an individual discussion was asked a similar set of questions with the same semi-structured format. Prior to participating, the group discussion students were asked to fill in a short
questionnaire in order to ascertain basic details about their background which they might not feel comfortable divulging in a group situation, for example, their family’s educational background.

Several ethical issues were encountered during the formation of the research design. Firstly, the sampling was an issue. Several methods of sampling were used, as outlined above, including self-selecting samples, and samples guided by teacher input. Each of these have advantages and disadvantages, but clearly there was an issue around the teacher led sampling choice, as all the students in the group were not given an equal opportunity to participate in the focus group. However, it was felt that given the various time constraints of the project, only approaching students who would realistically be willing to participate was important and so this choice of sampling method was utilised. Also, there was an ethical issue surrounding the design and questions of the focus group, with the possibility of reinforcing negative stereotypes with regard to not applying to higher education, as outlined above. All students who participated in the project received an information sheet with details of the research and signed a consent form to agree to the use of the data they provided.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire data was analysed using a tally chart and totals for each option were generated from this. The qualitative data gathered from the group activity was recorded in a document in order to identify key themes and allow responses to be compared and contrasted. All the data, both quantitative and qualitative, was recorded in a Word document so that the key findings were clearly accessible for analysis. Analysis of the interviews consisted of transcribing the discussions held and colour coding participant responses according to key themes. This meant that key themes which emerged from the discussions were clearly visible and could be linked back to the questionnaire results.

Findings

a) Questionnaire and Group Activity Results

A total of 18 students participated in the initial questionnaire and group work exercise, comprising 13 students who had made an application to university and 5 who had not. The initial questionnaire stage of the project resulted in some interesting preliminary findings. From the questionnaire, designed to gather mainly quantitative data, a distinct trend immediately emerged amongst students who had not applied to higher education in terms of their reasons why – all of the respondents stated that they did not want to continue studying. This trend is reinforced by the qualitative participant responses in the group activity, with students making statements such as ‘don’t want to cope with uni work’ and ‘fed up of studying’. Another key trend which emerged was the desire to gain more experience of the world of work. 3 of the 5 (60%) respondents cited this as a reason for not progressing to HE, and again this was reinforced by qualitative responses, with respondents saying they want to ‘gain experience’ and ‘know what the world of work is like’. Interestingly, only 2 of the 5 (40%) of the non-higher education applicants cited student finance as a concern within their questionnaire responses, but this emerged as a much stronger theme in the qualitative data, with participants making comments such as ‘Don’t get in debt’. Another insightful piece of information to come out of the questionnaire was the fact that out of the 18 respondents, only 3 (16%) stated that they were unaware of the introduction of Early Years Professional Status and the drive for graduates in the Early Years workforce, illustrating that students clearly had a general awareness of this issue. The questionnaire results also showed that of the 13 students who had applied to higher education, only one had not applied to the most local university offering a suitable course, Sheffield Hallam University. The majority of students had applied to universities within the Yorkshire and Humber region, with only a few students stating they had applied to universities outside this area, indicating a strong preference for local higher education provision.

b) Interview Results

Three key themes emerged from the focus group held with students intending to apply to university. Firstly, they felt that a key factor in their decision to apply to university was the availability of courses at local universities (within daily travelling distance). When asked to consider what they would do if their courses were not available within the local area, they agreed that they would probably not apply:

Researcher: If you couldn’t go to a local University, if you
had to move away, would you go?

Participant: No, I don’t think I would, no.

This reinforces the findings of the questionnaire and group work as outlined above. Linked to this factor was that of debt and financial concerns. The participants agreed that this was one of the main disadvantages of going to university, and that it was also a key factor in their decision to stay at home and study. However, when asked to discuss the issue of student finance in more detail, they agreed that due to the support available, such as grants and bursaries, they felt able to cope financially, commenting that ‘I’ll probably be eligible for a grant as well so that’s alright’. One participant also made the point that as the repayments were taken in a similar way to tax, she felt more comfortable about the repayments and being in debt: ‘the fact that you don’t even see the money go out of your bank, it’s just like a tax’. When asked about the influence of their friends and family on the decision making process, participants initially expressed the view that friends and family had not been influential in any way. One participant made the point that although none of her family had been to university before, they were relaxed about her making her own decision. However, when asked if an unsupportive family would have put them off applying to university they agreed that it would have, as they would have probably had to move out of the family home. One participant commented ‘if they weren’t supportive then we’d obviously have to move out’, this links back to the other theme of staying at home and commuting to university. Therefore, there appears to be some ambiguity with regard to the importance of family support. It is clear that the participants feel that they have made a choice independently without being pressured by their family in any way, yet they are aware that without the tacit support of their family, they would probably have chosen not to go. It can perhaps be interpreted that in some cases family support has an implicit, rather than overt role to play in higher education related decisions.

Another student who participated in a separate discussion also raised a number of interesting points. The student had originally intended not to apply to university, but had changed her plans and decided to apply. When asked about the reasons for this change, she cited anxiety about not getting the grades required for university as the main reason for originally not making an application. The student cited encouragement from teachers, and a discussion about her likely grades as the main reason for her change of plans, as well as positive support from her family. In this case, the role of family support has clearly taken a more overt role in the decision-making process, with the participant identifying it as a key factor.

Conclusions

From the students who did participate in the research, it is clear that the availability of local higher education provision, the level of financial support accessible and family support were key influencers in their decision to progress to university. This has several implications with regard to informing the practice of Information, Advice and Guidance work. Firstly, it is evident that information about the range of options open to students and also the financial support available to them - should they choose to continue their education - is crucial in terms of supporting students through the decision-making process. Also, work with parents/carers is important as these clearly play an important role in students’ decisions, whether in an overt or more subtle way.

Another key factor which emerged from the finding of the research was the importance of students’ belief in their academic ability and their desire to continue studying. Thus, it is clear that with regard to academic ability, the encouragement and realistic prediction of grades on the part of teachers has a key role to play in order to ensure students are fully aware of their potential to achieve.

It is clear that the findings outlined above are closely linked to those of Bingham and O’Hara (2004 and 2007) in terms of the importance attached to perceptions of academic ability, family influence and concerns about student finance. In the case of the research carried out at Longley Park, participants identified these as significant factors in their decision making process when choosing whether or not to progress to higher education. In the Bingham and O’Hara (2004 and 2007) research studies these factors were also perceived by students already engaged in the higher education system as being crucial in terms of their progression. Thus, it can perhaps be argued that there is a degree of consensus amongst those considering higher education and those who have
already made the decision with regard to the key influencing factors on the decision-making process.

Furthermore, perhaps the most fascinating conclusion which can be drawn from the research is the problematic nature of engaging students who are not applying to higher education. As also found by Fuller et al (2007), throughout this project there were issues with finding students who were not applying to higher education who were willing to participate in the research. Fuller et al (2007) also encountered problems when gaining access to non-participating students as they were not in the education system. In this research, access to students was not an issue, as they were still engaged in the education process, but they were still reluctant to participate in the research. This is a distinct contrast to the reactions of students who were applying to university, as these students were much more willing to participate and share their views. If time were available for further research, it would be interesting to explore the reasons for this.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Several key messages for practitioners can be derived from the research findings. Firstly, it is important to ensure that accurate information about higher education options is communicated to students to enable them to make informed choices. With reference to the significance that participants’ placed on local provision, it is perhaps pertinent to focus on regional opportunities when delivering this information. Alongside this, information regarding Student Finance arrangements is also essential, as it was clearly identified by the participants that knowledge and understanding of this prevented finance from becoming a barrier. Additionally, it is vital to ensure that students have realistic expectations of their predicted grades in advance of making their progression choices. As such, involving their subject teachers in the decision making process is a key part of assisting students to make decisions. The involvement of students’ family members is also crucial, as the research clearly demonstrates that students feel their family members are key influencers when making their decisions.

**Reflections on being involved in action research**

Overall, being involved in action research has been a rewarding and enjoyable experience. The process has not been easy, with many difficulties and frustrations occurring along the way, such as the difficulty in engaging students with the project. However, the results of the research have proved to be insightful and will help staff to assist future learners to make an informed decision about their future path.

**Sources**


Returning to Learn: the study experiences of part time foundation degree students

Mary Haynes, Department of Education, Childhood and Inclusion, Sheffield Hallam University

This chapter reports on the experience of study support encountered by a small group of part time, work based ‘returning to learn’ students who were in the middle of a foundation degree (FD) at the University. Data was collected through surveys and focus groups suggesting that their initial experiences were frustrating, hampered learning and impacted on aspirations. Two key messages emerged from the evaluative study; firstly steps should be taken by the University to ensure that part time students are better prepared before embarking on the FD. Secondly appropriate study skills such as digital fluency should be embedded early in the course with ongoing timely and accessible support available throughout. It suggests that institutional change is needed in relation to perceptions and understanding of the needs of part time students returning to learn. The study findings strongly indicate that more effective models of support need to be established to offer a positive transitional and learning experience for part time FD students on their journey into and through higher education.

Whilst teaching a range of vocational awards in early years at a college of further education, an interest in the experience of non-traditional students making the transition into higher education was developed. Since teaching in higher education and becoming involved in development work within the Higher Futures Lifelong Learning Network the commitment to enhance the learning experience of non-traditional students at university grew. A desire to explore and understand the study support experiences of part time foundation students to help them make a successful transition and benefit from positive learning experiences led to the inception of this small scale study. The study was carried out between February and June 2009 and supported by a multidisciplinary team from the university comprising of academic staff, the Learning Hub (information and support) and the Information Advisory Service who were all interested in the development of effective support strategies for part time students.

Originally a polytechnic, Sheffield Hallam University has an emphasis on applied and vocational courses. It is one of the UK’s largest universities with over 30,000 students, 32% of whom are part time. The University has a commitment to the enhancement of the part time student experience and supports initiatives to do so. This study was a small piece of evaluative work to explore the study support experiences of a group of work based FD students who were ‘returning to learn’ at the university. Early years foundation degree provision was chosen for the study because it is an area of growth due to generous government funding. The FD in Early Years is delivered by the university and partner colleges on a part time basis, to work based students both on and off campus in response to local needs and in support of widening participation. All of the students in the cohort selected for the study worked in the same large metropolitan borough where university staff travelled to deliver the FD in a small community centre just over ten miles from the University. The learning environment was dissimilar both culturally and socially to that on the University campus with no direct access to University learning resources and limited IT facilities. The focus group who volunteered to take part in the study comprised of eleven students all of whom were all female, white British ranging in age from mid twenties to mid fifties. They were all experiencing higher education for the first time; for some prior educational experience had not been positive. All had followed a vocational route to achieve a level three qualification; most had not been engaged in formal learning for a number of years and were the first in their family to access higher education. Their motivation was initially extrinsic having been directly targeted by their early years workforce development officer to enrol onto the FD with the incentive of full course funding amongst other benefits as part of the national drive to up skill the early years workforce. They had therefore found themselves unexpectedly returning to formal education after a gap of several years and although in the middle of the FD expressed low levels of confidence in the academic dimension of the course.

The landscape of higher education is steadily changing as the agenda for lifelong learning and widening participation becomes increasingly prominent (DfES, 2003). Foundation degrees were introduced in 2000 as part of the government agenda to increase provision and enhance access to higher education, close skills gaps and help to boost the economy (DfES, 2003). Within the early years sector they are recognised as a key progression...
route to encourage the workforce to develop relevant skills, knowledge and understanding to support the growth of a more highly trained workforce. FDs were designed to meet the needs of both the student and workforce by integrating academic study with work based learning. Part time work based students can however become worried as they are positioned into the ‘alien culture’ of academic study which can have a negative impact on learning (Askham, 2008, p90), the significance of which should not be undervalued. Despite anxieties about academic study students on FDs do not always find sufficient or suitable levels of study support (Tierney and Slack 2005). The need therefore to adapt institutional habitus to meet the diverse needs of non-traditional students and accommodate the increasingly wide range of provision which includes FDs has led to debate around the changing nature of the teaching and learning experience in higher education (DFES, 2003). To cultivate success in non-traditional learners Bamber and Tett (2000) suggest their learning should be underpinned with adequate and appropriate support that will enable them to develop confidence and experience success. It is therefore critical that as non-traditional learners start their journey into higher education they experience a milieu where they are encouraged and supported to develop strong study skills that will help them to build confidence and experience success (Tait and Entwistle, 1996). Krause et al (2005) highlight the role that tutors and associated support staff have to play in the creation of a nurturing learning environment and Kift, (2008) suggests that integration of both academic and other support services has the potential to enhance and transform the learning experience for non-traditional students. This work was drawn upon during the evaluative study seeking to improve part time student experience of study support.

Base line data was collected when the students began their final level four module. On completion of digital fluency surveys the focus group were split into three small groups to make the process less intimidating, merging at the end of the session to establish and record on flip charts a mutual understanding of emerging points from smaller group discussion. The main purpose of the focus group discussion was to establish an evidence base through the exploration of the students’ perceptions of their development of study skills, challenges that they have faced and strategies that they have employed to resolve challenges identified. The final data collection point was four months later to evaluate the impact of study support interventions, identified from baseline data that had been implemented during the module. The purpose of the second focus group was to explore students’ perceptions of their development of study skills, challenges faced in preparation and completion of their last assignment and strategies that they or the university could employ to resolve challenges identified. The focus group were invited to reflect upon interventions in response to data collected from the first focus group by noting the level of helpfulness using a simple traffic light sticker system on large charts. They then split into two small groups for initial discussion eventually amalgamating to determine and record on flip charts communal agreement of emerging points from the smaller group discussions. All participants retook the digital fluency survey. Data collected over the four month period was analysed after the each data gathering point and emerging themes identified. Data from the digital fluency survey was put into chart form; pictorial representation helped interpretation of data. All data from the first focus group was revisited during the evaluation and analysis of data from the second focus group.

Data was gathered from the focus group at the beginning of the project in February 2009 and again four months later to measure confidence, levels of digital fluency and evaluate the impact of interventions. A self audit of digital fluency was collected at both data gathering points. Qualitative data was collected through focus group conversations to evaluate student perceptions of the development of their study skills, challenges faced, strategies used to resolve challenges and approaches that the university could employ to overcome challenges encountered. All participants were given information concerning the nature of the evaluation project and all gave written consent to use information collected.
terminology in module handbooks, lack of clarity about the standard of work and the level that they should be working to, getting out and returning books from the learning centre and lack of software on their own computers. There was a clear message from the group as to how the challenges could be met by the University identifying specifically better organisation and information, consistency and further personal support from tutors and more IT support. Students attempted to meet the challenges by working together with family, friends, peers and mentors in the work place.

Some of the issues uncovered could not be resolved in the short term or within the study period and called for a full appraisal of the FD to consider the embodiment of study skills within the infrastructure. Interventions to support the development of study skills and competencies identified from the analysis of base line data that would be most useful to help the students fill skills gaps, gain confidence and start to manage their learning more effectively were provided. These included support with development of IT skills and competencies, conventions of academic writing and library skills including accessing electronic sources of information. Due to the lack of IT in the community centre an IT room in the local further education college was used for study support interventions. Co-delivery with academic staff and relevant specialists was adopted to create a supportive learning environment to scaffold learning and build levels of confidence. The specialists designed and created a ‘toolbox’ of related support materials to help students practice and reinforce their skills independently, a study skills handbook was developed by the course leader and ‘drop in sessions’ were offered by the Learning Hub for further support. Practicalities of accessing University resource for this group who were learning at a distance from the University were also considered. The learning centre extended the book loan period from one week to three to ease access to book stock and an online study support service from the central student support service was provided for further guidance with academic writing and assessment. This approach drew heavily on staff resource but as Bamber and Tett (2000, p73) point out working effectively with non-traditional students is ‘teacher intensive’

Data collected after interventions identified had been put in place four months later was contradictory in places. Results from the digital fluency survey suggested increased confidence in the use and application of IT, with the majority of the focus group perceiving themselves as very confident in handling basic IT functions and Blackboard. However, this self reported increase in confidence was not necessarily borne out in focus group discussions. Issues emerging from the discussion groups mostly related to confident and effective use of e-learning resources and technologies necessary to support and enhance achievement. The students indicated that the University could have done more prior to the start of the course to explain the significant role of digital technologies as part of the learning process. As many of the students had no recent experience of formal education they were surprised by the way technology has changed the learning experience and many saw adapting to this as the largest obstacle to success. They believed that ongoing interactive IT sessions were necessary to support study. Even after the interactive library skills session using IT some students reported difficulty finding and accessing sources of information online, although they had been given paper support materials for supplementary guidance. Up take of the on line study support service was poor; some students described how they had attempted to use the service but were unable to because they did not know how to send an attachment. They found the newly developed study skills handbook, support materials and module readers helpful although their preferred method of support was face to face. The key messages emerging from the focus group were that steps should be taken by the university to ensure that students are better prepared before embarking on the FD, services and support for study skills should be embedded early in the programme and ongoing support should be timely and accessible.

The findings from this work suggested that the majority of part time students in the study had low levels of digital confidence at the beginning of the course and that information concerning the significance of digital technologies to experience success during the foundation degree should be highlighted prior to the start of the course. Although the students appreciated the paper based study support materials developed by specialists take up of on line central services study support was hampered by students’ lack of confidence with technology and none of the students accessed the drop in study support service offered by the learning Hub on campus. Clegg, Bradley and Smith. (2006) found that the association of failure with support services tended to make students reluctant to access them, this
alongside difficulties and practicalities of access to both online and on campus support, may have been a factor that further compounded the extremely low take up of study support offered. Clegg, Bradley and Smith, (2006) go on to suggest that the integration of study support into course design would be a more effective approach; analysis of data collected suggested that the students in the focus group may have found this beneficial in the development of digital fluency and academic writing skills. Knox (2005) calls for reconstruction of content, delivery and assessment structure and design to support non traditional students to experience success; the students in the study suggested that services and support for study skills should be embedded early in the programme with accessible ongoing support which is in alignment with the work that Krause et al (2005) conducted with first year students indicating that the embodiment of opportune support at the beginning of a course would help them to make a more positive transition into higher education. Kift, (2008) also recommends the integration of both academic and other support services to enhance and improve the learning experience for part time non-traditional students. Within this infrastructure student learning needs to be carefully scaffolded (Krause et al, 2005) highlighting the influence and significance of tutors and associated support staff in the learning environment. All of the focus group stressed the benefit of support from peers, family and friends is highly valued and again this is also come out of other studies of part time students (Askham, 2008).

This study provided valuable insight into perceptions of study support experiences of vocational, work based ‘returning to learn’ FD students studying off campus. The project highlighted their anxieties in relation to study support and its impact on learning. It suggests that institutional change is needed in relation to perceptions and understanding of the needs of part time students returning to learn. The project findings strongly indicate that more effective models of support need to be established to offer a more positive experience of study support for part time non-traditional students in higher education. Two key areas of development to be considered to improve study support of part time ‘returning to learn’ students emerged from the study. Firstly before enrolment clear expectations about the significance and central role of digital fluency to the FD should be made. Secondly an alternative model for study support should be seriously considered and firmly embedded in course structure and design.

Postscript

Initially the range of short term interventions to boost confidences and competencies of the FD students had a positive impact on their progress but more recent behaviours and attitudes of the group demonstrate expectations of and dependency on a high level of support which has hindered the development of autonomy and is a potential threat to further success. Frustration and lack of aspiration with little evidence of any intrinsic desire or perception of individual responsibility to take control of learning is beginning to surface. This observation has been the catalyst for a larger piece of work aiming to improve the process of transition into higher education for part time work based students that nurtures an autonomous approach to their learning to help them realize their potential. The need to adapt the prior pedagogical approach informed by the study of experiences of FD students described in this chapter has lead to the construction of a new infrastructure for the early years FD that has embedded appropriate and purposeful study support designed to nurture autonomy and create a more positive learning environment.

Thanks to

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Engaging with the Somali community

Margaret Mitchell, Widening Participation Aimhigher Projects Manager, University of Sheffield

Introduction

This retrospective, reflective study aims to investigate my own work as a Widening Participation practitioner in engaging with people from the Somali communities in Sheffield over a period from July 2008 to July 2009.

As a working practitioner based in a Russell group university, I manage a government sponsored, Aimhigher Widening Participation, adult - community learning project. I have met and worked with many non-traditional, potential students and in particular, different Somali community groups from targeted local areas. This report reflects on my work and allows me to frame my own questions about good practice. It focuses on the strategies I used to engage with Somali people within their communities and identifies which factors in my experience are most effective, amongst this group, in raising aspirations and increasing motivation towards studying at higher education level.

Identifying the target group

The Somali community is one of the fastest growing communities in Sheffield as well as being identified as one of the most disadvantaged, according to a report from a Somali Community Action day organised in collaboration with Sheffield City Council and local Somali people in 2008. Another report in the guardian highlights ‘the social exclusion of British Somalis is unparalleled and mirrors the isolation of Somalia itself. www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jun/05/immigration

The overall aims of my involvement with the local Somali community were twofold;

- to find out what the levels of understanding about higher education were in the target group; and
- to develop ways of helping adults/refugees to make sense of information that impacts on their own and their children’s education and to help them make informed choices regarding higher education.

The Government’s ‘Widening Participation’ agenda aims to improve the flow of students into higher education from poorer socio-economic neighbourhoods who are not represented in or benefitting from a university education. Targets were set to establish 50% of the younger population into HE by 2010. The majority of Aimhigher government funding was earmarked for work to be carried out with the 14-19 age group with little provision for widening participation work to include adults.

The term ‘widening participation’ needs clarification, it is interpreted at different levels of understanding depending on which connotation fits individual and institutional agendas. At grass roots level reality dictates that it is more than just bringing a wider mix of people through the doors of universities – the work necessary to make progression happen involves laborious work involving a complex web of real and perceived barriers and networks that are often at odds with actual aims of the government agenda set.

The challenges facing institutions, communities and practitioners in addressing the ‘WP’ targets are often daunting, resource intensive and not easy to overcome.

Edwards (2000) in Stretching the Academy discusses the dichotomy of widening participation in higher education as follows:

‘In government rhetoric, ‘widening participation’ in higher education is a way of stretching a system that was once designed for an elite, to accommodate a wider social mix of students – particularly from previously excluded groups… Its agenda provides Higher Education with an enormous challenge. Not least because there are many in academia who have a different – older, more intellectual – understanding about the purpose of education. They see no reason to revise their opinion that expansion and diversity equates with declining standards and ‘dumbing down’.

She also points out that ‘Universities on the whole – especially older universities – do not regard themselves as popular resources whose credibility lies in their obligations and responsiveness to local communities and...
Contextual background of working with adult learners

The Institute for Lifelong Learning (TILL) at the University of Sheffield has a distinguished history of providing part-time university education for adults dating back over fifty years when in its previous configuration it was The Department of Extra Mural Studies.

Today TILL continues to offer part-time Degree level education to adults who have the potential to succeed. Some of the challenges facing higher education institutions include making way for more diverse groups of students including refugees from countries beyond Europe that have fled war-torn countries, whilst also retaining and responding to the needs of home students in deprived areas. In terms of the Somali ‘individual’ and ‘community identity’, practitioners and institutions need to recognise how intrinsic the Muslim identity is to different communities and to embrace the cultural differences that arise.

Sporton and Valentine (2007) found in their case study research entitled ‘Identities on the move: the integration experience of Somali refugee and asylum seeker young people’, that

‘the experience of forced mobility and loss of attachment to place means the identity ‘Muslim’ becomes for many young Somali people the most important and consistent way they have of defining who they are’.

In my own experience this also applies to many of the older Somali generation. There is a need to support refugee learners back onto the HE ladder by recognising and validating the experience/qualifications that many Somali people have already achieved in their own country but have difficulty in having that experience calibrated without evidence of relevant certificates etc.

Research Questions

My original intention was to conduct empirical fieldwork involving individual interviews with members of the Somali community. However, for various reasons, it became clear that I would be limited to writing a reflective study of my own practice. The questions I have reflected upon include:

- ‘What works and what doesn’t’ when widening participation practitioners begin to engage with people in Somali communities to support them to participate in higher education?
- What were the challenges for the learners, for the practitioners and for the institutions?
- What recommendations can I draw from my conclusions that will contribute to the effective efforts of practitioners working in this field in the future?

Engaging in BME communities – Strategies/Motivational factors for participating adults

My current role was created in February 2007 and time was needed to develop relevant community links and for the project to become visible within the local communities.

In the course of my work it became obvious there was a great need to provide more specific information that was relevant to Somali educational attainment for parents. I began to organise ‘Introduction to Higher Education’ events in two, sometimes three different parts of the city that were home to a large proportion of Black Minority Ethnic families. I used two or three neutral venues that the Somali communities were comfortable with using. I had to work with separate groups in separate venues to avoid conflict. I listened carefully and picked up vibes that signalled what was acceptable, for instance women sat at the back of the room and men sat at the front with a gap in between, my instinct was to encourage the women to move closer to the front but quickly realised this wasn’t the norm.

I also wanted to give children activities that would amuse them while parents talked about their educational needs. This strategy would have worked better if I had organised a separate space for the children as the parents did not seem to see the importance of organising play or bringing something to amuse the children. They seemed motivated to find out what was on offer for their older children. Very small toddlers were expected to just sit
while parents listened.

Higher Education Information sessions were designed as a response to community members requests for information. It became apparent that the main issues and most pressing needs for Somali families in terms of education appeared to be:

- low attainment in Somali children’s education
- lack of Somali speaking teaching assistants in schools
- no GCSE in Somali language available
- lack of English language skills – especially mothers
- little understanding of the UK education system
- dissatisfaction and feelings of helplessness amongst parents, that their children were at low performing schools and families didn’t know how to have any influence over this
- more information and understanding was needed around how the education system works and how parents/adults could access further and higher education or use their degrees obtained in other countries.

Methods used and issues raised

If the sessions were to interest and benefit this community we had to be flexible, sensitive, creative and realistic on what could be achieved.

I was careful about matching the mentors I used for the sessions; one was a young doctor who related his experience of his educational journey and told how his mother had been instrumental in his progress, illuminating the point about parents being key influencers in their children’s education. Another was a graduate from Iran who stressed the important impact of girls receiving education and thereby not perpetuating illiteracy amongst future generations, as girls become mothers themselves.

Aspirations towards higher education were already very high amongst the group but, as newcomers to the UK, isolated from wider networks offering important information, coupled with lack of understanding of the system, lack of English language and other debilitating social issues, they have very real barriers to progression i.e.

- Lack of affordable English Language classes
- Experience of isolation – migrational refugees separated from their country through war, with large families (often one–parent only families)
- Pockets of people from Somalia who had achieved education in their own country to a high level but now were unable to work or study here due to uncertain citizenship status
- Loss of status for men with no employment - who traditionally in Somali culture would be the head of the household and make the meaningful decisions concerning the family
- Intergenerational conflict — Sporton and Valentine (2007) found in their study ‘Identities on the move’ that ‘intercultural differences are emerging between the generations within the Somali communities’. In my own experience I found that Somali parents put pressure on their children to ‘do well’ at school. Problems arise when parents don’t understand the educational system and often don’t understand their English-speaking children’s language. In many cases the children were born in the UK and are the interpreters for their parents and know very little about Somalia and can’t speak Somalian.

Activities and exchange of information sessions covered the following topics:

- Introduction to British Educational system
- ESOL Assessments/classes arranged
- Exclusion from school – understanding the British system
- Post 16 Education , choices – Connexions
- Advice on UCAS applications for parents
- WEA – information about community courses linked to HE progression
- Combining Eid celebration with HE event
Visits to University of Sheffield/open days/appointments made for potential parents and students to speak to admissions tutors in different departments

Migration in the 21st Century – University taster session

Higher Education progression steps for parents through the creation of a Somali children’s authentic story book by parents

Collaborative work with colleagues enriched the sessions and strengthened the key people’s resolve to do more to help themselves.

The following strategies were successful, simple and effective:

**Go to their community**

Traditionally these groups are not easy to reach, due to the displaced nature of refugees and the policy of dispersal to particular areas, where they have been encouraged in many cases to settle. The Somali people are not to be found in neat cohorts in colleges or community classes but do however gravitate to four or five certain communities in Sheffield where there are other Somali families already settled.

**Do something that is of benefit for the participants immediately**

As a practitioner it’s not easy to penetrate a community that is fearful but desperate to find out how to help their children’s attainment in schools and to find a better life for themselves in this country. Practitioners have to negotiate the schism that divides different clans within communities. Part of the problems facing Somalis’ restricted community development involves issues around ‘not feeling understood by the host community and lack of knowledge on processes and systems for working with the public sector’ (summary findings from Community Profiling for Neighbourhoods Directorate, 31 July 2006, (Meridian).

**Build trust and mutual respect**

In an effort to be strategic and get to know the community, raise confidence and remove barriers to accessing important knowledge and skills, I arranged a fun/educational event at an animal theme park in July 2008 for 50 community members. I was willing to work within whatever agenda was necessary that would help provide a way of getting to know the parents and children within this community to enable participation work to begin. The day out was an opportunity to gain valuable insight into their educational needs whilst creating a friendly, enjoyable atmosphere for parents and children together. From the results of questionnaires completed during the event we were able to plan information exchange sessions in both Somali and English at the local community centres. We were also able to get some idea of English levels from the parents and children through planned educational tasks. The outcomes for the day included:

- Fifty parents and young people attended the event
- Ten key members of the community registered to attend further Education Information sessions in order to pass on and translate information to other members of the community that couldn’t speak English
- Seventy children’s names were put forward as potentially wanting to join a ‘Study support’ or ‘Homework Club’
- Twelve adults registered to seek support with English/ESOL classes. I was pleased that the response to engagement was so positive, the event contributed greatly to forging valuable links and understanding of the issues facing refugees and demonstrated to them the commitment that we had and were willing to develop in order to improve their opportunities. This initial event was the catalyst for what has now, a year later, led to a very successful Somali Graduate Mentoring project that takes place at a weekly Saturday school at the university.
Be prepared for an influx of enquiries beyond the scope of the project

Jane Thompson 2000 ibid points out ‘major structural inequalities, and the problems they create are not caused by education and cannot be resolved by educational initiatives operating in isolation’.

The Somali community have many social issues beyond the scope of this project but nevertheless the overriding motivation from the group was their determination to get the best educational information, advice and guidance possible for themselves and their children.

Use Networking/Parent mentors/Role models

I used parent mentors that were recruited as part of my overall Aimhigher work and began to work with other partners to reach Somali adults via a Homework Club. The organisers of the club were not keen for anything to detract from the work they had carefully set up with the children to do homework. I persevered and was able to persuade them to allow me to set up information sessions with the parents of the children attending the club. Using graduates /parent mentors, we held HE information sessions in a separate room while children worked on homework close by.

Engaging with parents – the first sessions

The first session was advertised through Somali contacts at the homework club, by writing to the parents of children at the club (written in Somali and English) and by word of mouth. As permission was granted for us to use the adjoining room where children were, this meant parents could utilise the time and did not have to make two journeys back and forth to collect children but could stay and have space to listen and participate.

At the first session we anxiously waited for the first parents to turn up; one Somali mother came shyly and nervously into the room and sat down. Soon others arrived (all women) and we were able to ascertain (through interpreters and gestures and broken English) what their needs and concerns were (using sweets wrapped in paper with ‘frequently asked questions’ written in English and Somali). We also invested in buying 12 Somali/English dictionaries for the group. The publications had been difficult to get, the university bookshop had trouble sourcing them and I knew that the Somali group would not have been in a position to get these books easily.

Be very clear about boundaries/scope of the project

Word spread and the following weeks more and more people arrived at the sessions, including fathers – this had an impact on how we managed the sessions as the English levels were so varied. We changed practice and responded quickly to the larger group by separating the advanced English speakers from the beginners to work with an interpreter. The nature of the Somali people is to use the oral tradition and pass on any news to friends and relatives. This meant we never knew how many people would turn up the following week once word had travelled. Starting on time was difficult to achieve as we had failed to allow for prayers and picking up children from the mosques. Eventually we reached agreement about time and organisation of sessions, and limited the sessions to parents of children at different key stages – post 16 etc. In the initial stages problems arose when people brought all manner of enquiries regarding educational and other social issues and needed very individual one to one support. We arranged that we would deal with these questions when the planned sessions were over.

Challenges

Challenges for me included dealing with ethical issues such as avoiding the exploitation of vulnerable people and ensuring I did not betray the position of trust that I was placed in, in working closely with this community. Ethically I didn’t want to exploit their trust in me by burdening them with research (this was why I didn’t ask them to be involved in this report). It was easy for this group to see me as the link to the university that may influence their child’s or their own entry into the institution, merely by my association with them. I had to be very careful not to allow unrealistic expectations to get in the way of offering sound and much needed advice.

Parents sometimes had unrealistic ambitions for their children. Many insisted their children would become doctors or lawyers (when educational results or the child’s preferences were not echoing that ambition). Some parents didn’t want to consider vocational learning
or any other associated professions to medicine, such as nursing etc. I worked with Connexions advisers to highlight the whole spectrum of different post 16 choices including vocational routes into different professions. It was necessary to be very clear about the scope of my role. I was also challenged by the need to provide translators that were correctly interpreting the language we were using. This was alleviated somewhat by having local Somali speakers helping at sessions and taking time to ensure people understood the information.

**Challenges facing HE institutions** Even as a practitioner working in a university it is not easy to book certain rooms and resources to enable community learners to attend taster sessions. The priority for classroom allocation is obviously for students already being educated here. But if we are serious about widening participation we need to be able to inspire potential students, allow them to experience what is on offer at university and dispel any myths (for those to whom these institutions are alien). The ‘Information Commons’ building has an oxymoronic title as it is not open to the host community. According to the Collins Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary (new edition 2004) ‘If something is common to two or more people or groups, it is done, possessed or used by them all’.

**Other challenges** (ongoing) include finding courses that fit the needs of the learners and supporting them to access the appropriate level course; this often means contacting partners and identifying likely candidates that would be ready and in a position to benefit from higher education. Many are still in educational limbo – not being able to access regular ESOL classes. There is a distinct lack of specialised, one to one HE advice and guidance for adults from any community once they have left their school days behind but for adults from the Somali communities this problem is exacerbated.

**Challenges facing Somali adults/parents**

Restricted sources of contacts for support – they have informal networks but don’t have wide diverse networks into education

How to overcome language barriers?

How to build important knowledge-base and ability to understand systems, to strengthen the capacity of individuals and community organisations and to influence decisions affecting their own and their children’s education. Pat Whaley in Stretching the Academy (2000) draws our attention to the rhetoric of politicians who ‘talk continually of the magic word community, we must have more of one, we must be in one. We must strengthen a sense of community to cure all the ills of society’.

These are just a few of the challenges to be faced.

**Findings**

We found though that despite a host of challenges the Somali community regularly attended the education-information sessions. Lack of affordable childcare is a huge issue, especially for one-parent families, but mothers were willing to bring small children with them in order not to miss information.

We found that people completed questionnaires that demonstrated they had learned more about higher education opportunities as a result of engagement with the project.

Individuals from the Somali community will call me now independently to seek further educational advice and to inform me of their next steps. A working relationship has developed that means I can send any relevant information that will interest or affect the group to key people and they will disseminate it. This kind of ‘bridging’ community engagement is a vital cog in the widening participation wheel (even though this kind of activity will inevitably net many that are not ready or even close to fitting the ‘criteria’ for HE). We found that fathers are becoming more involved with their children’s education (and by extension their own) through the setting up of a Father’s group attached to the Homework club using games, maps and educational courses. We were able to demonstrate to others that parents will come to sessions to help themselves and their children if a few conditions of engagement are met (as described above).

The academics amongst the Somali parents are determined to improve children’s educational progress in Sheffield. Together we have managed to extend social networks that have been instrumental to them accessing information, funds, resources and contacts to set up a mentoring project, using Somali volunteer graduates. We
have now recruited the first 15 graduates that are mentoring 40 young people aged 14 - 19 at the University of Sheffield.

Conclusions

This project work illustrates to me that without definite links between the community and development practitioners who have inroads into educational institutions and are well connected to wider, more diverse networks, then it is unlikely that significant numbers of Somali adults will have the relevant information they need to support their desire to reach higher education. That’s not to say that those adults who are determined to reach their goal will not do so without intervention through outreach but the numbers participating are low. (Figures are difficult to break down because Somali ethnicity is not characterised as an individual ethnic group). For younger Somali people there is more hope of success. Many children already operate in two languages, learning English quickly and speaking Somali at home. Council figures for children’s Key stages in attainment in the city show gradual improvement but there is still a mountain to climb to widen the flow of children and adults from this ethnic minority group into higher education.

It’s difficult to see in the immediate future how successful widening participation for the adults in this group can be when there are so many underlying problems that prevent the Somali community from taking up opportunities in HE, even where individual practitioners may be hugely committed and often do more than what might be expected. Indeed, the trial and error nature of some of the activities over the year have led me to be more cautious of working with basic learners. The distance they have to travel to prepare for higher education is a journey that is beyond the scope of this project.

Practitioners must highlight the demands of study expected without dampening enthusiasm to fulfil ambition. Raising aspirations must include realistic assessments of the commitment needed to complete the HE journey. In response to this, we are now planning to offer 10 university credit ‘Study Skills in HE’ modules, to be delivered in community venues. This is one way to give potential adult students a flavour of the levels expected on the route to experiencing and succeeding in higher education.

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A Taste of Research – An analysis of the experiences of young people acting as community researchers

Sheila Hudson, Sector Development Officer (H&SC) and IAGTO, and Catherine Ross, Project Support and Monitoring Officer, Sheffield College

Introduction

The Sheffield College is one of the foremost colleges in the UK providing both academic and vocational training to enhance qualifications, skills and employability. The College has four main sites across Sheffield and its head offices are based in the city centre.

The Reconnect project was a collaborative effort between different agencies and community groups making up the Sheffield Learning for Life BME Strategic Framework working group. It looked at young people from certain community groups in Sheffield and it had two strands. The first strand was to investigate why many young people from certain ethnic communities in Sheffield were not engaged in Education, Employment or Training (NEETS). The second strand dealt with the reasons why some young people from these communities, while seen as having the potential to go onto higher education (HE), did not actually go on to HE. The focus of the research was on the four main ethnic communities in Sheffield; African Caribbean, Pakistani, Yemeni and Somali.

This practitioner research project focuses on the young researchers who were directly involved in the research process itself and provides an insight into their experiences of the Reconnect project as a whole.

Background

The Reconnect project was funded through ESF and Higher Futures.

The project began in March 2008 and the first phase involved a community co-ordinator from each of the four communities finding four young people to take on the roles of community researchers. For the most part, information about the Reconnect project was filtered through to the relevant community centres of Sheffield and so the young people applied to take part as a result. The sixteen young people appointed were then trained as researchers through initial meetings, workshops and one to one support. This training in research was conducted by independent research professionals.

Having received support and training, the young people helped to devise interview questionnaires and were then put to the task of interviewing NEETs and those who hadn’t engaged in HE from their community. The interviews themselves took place at Sheffield Futures (who provided the NEETs and HE interviewee contact data) and at local community centres.

Once the interviews had been completed, findings collected and evaluations undergone, the project itself was to all intents and purposes complete. However, as the project was drawing to a close, Sheila Hudson (Higher Futures Sector Development Officer) of Sheffield College felt that a fundamental research angle had not been touched upon. She cited an opportunity to research The Reconnect project from the perspective of the young researchers who took part in the process and to document their experiences of the project itself.

The brief that this practitioner set for her research project was therefore to concentrate on the experiences of the young researchers involved in the Reconnect project and to review the merits and pitfalls of the project from their point of view. Through this research project she aimed to discover the reasons for the young researchers’ involvement in the project as well as finding out what they learnt from the experience; she worked in collaboration with her colleague Catherine Ross (Project and Monitoring Officer, Sheffield College).

Research Questions

The key questions the two practitioners sought to answer were:

- Why did the young people get involved in the project?
- How involved with their own communities were the young people before the project began?
- What did they gain from the experience on both a personal and professional level?
- What were the main issues which came up as a result of the project?
What did the young people hope would come out of the project?

How successful did the young researchers find the project as a whole?

Research Design

The research itself took the form of a series of interviews with each of the young researchers involved in the project. There were 16 community researchers and of these eight agreed to be interviewed for the practitioner research project. Those interviewed were two representatives from the Yemeni community (both female), two from the Bangladeshi community (one male, one female), one from the Pakistani community (female), two from the Somali community (one male, one female) and one from the African Caribbean community (one female). The interviews were arranged and conducted by the HF Sector Development Officer, with technical assistance from the Project and Monitoring Officer.

The two practitioners were very aware that their research would largely be drawn from transcripts and recordings from the interviews with the young researchers and so the planning stage of the interviews was critical in order to record all relevant data. They prepared questionnaires to use as a guideline for each interview so that the basic structure of each one would be the same. To allow for 'off topic' data to be recorded, they also used a portable voice recorder and took additional notes as a back up.

Data Analysis

After the interviews were completed, the recordings were fully transcribed. The data from the transcripts was then colour-coded according to the issues being investigated and any patterns were noted.

Findings

Experience of community

One of the first questions the team sought to answer related to how the young researchers felt about their own community and this was the focus of the first part of the interview questionnaire.

The young people’s experiences ranged from being part of a management committee at their local centre, to supporting tutors at an after-school group. One interviewee said;

“I have taken part in the Study Support Group which they run [at the centre]. Also I helped out at their Play Schemes in the summer holidays.”

Another outlined her community experience as:

“I worked at ISRAC community centre in my 1st year at uni doing admin, reception, translating work etc.”

All but one interviewee said they visited their community centre as a service user as well as a volunteer/employer.

What came through quite vividly was the strong sense of loyalty and commitment the young people had for the project in relation to their communities. From the interview data, it was clear that being part of the community was something that had been important to many of the young researchers from an early age. One interviewee from the Yemeni community said:

“There’s been a long family involvement with YETC [Yemeni Community Centre in Sheffield]. [My] older brothers and sisters worked and volunteered here. I’ve been coming for years to the after school group.”

The research team discovered through the interviews that all eight young researchers had a background of working in the community, either helping family members and friends or carrying out paid work at community centres.

Why did the young people get involved?

An important question the practitioners sought to answer was why the young people got involved in the project in the first place. Three key themes emerged from the data relating to this question; being involved out of personal interest, being involved for own academic and developmental reasons (i.e. for what they sought to gain) and being involved for the purpose of change.

In response to the ‘why did you get involved?’ question,
five out of the eight said they had been drawn to the project because the subject seemed of interest to them personally and they had wanted to find out more:

The young researchers said:

'[I] wanted to gain more knowledge of the subject. Had some background knowledge....but wanted proof of the issues.'

'I was very interested in the research topic of finding out why young people aren’t going on to university'

'I hoped to find out why young people were making the decisions they did'

'I wanted to find out why young people don’t go into education or stay on to HE.'

The interviewees also spoke about getting involved for their own reasons and experience. The reasons they mentioned included CV enhancement, a complement to their university work and a chance to improve their skills/learn new ones.

Sample answers from three of the researchers detailing these academic reasons were:

‘Gain more knowledge and experience’

‘... be good for my CV and for future references-It would give me more of an idea about which age group of children and young people I might want to work with’

‘Thought it would be a good opportunity to do some practical research rather than from a book that I do my studies. Real face to face research’.

The third type of reason for the young people getting involved concerned bringing about change. Half of the interviewers gave an answer relating to getting involved for change and these responses were as follows:

‘I wanted to go on to try and encourage young people to go into HE’

‘I felt it would be important to have a part in getting young people into work or education’

‘...as I’m interested to help to make change in the community – thought I could help support people who have problems with education and getting into education’

‘...looking into why young people who had the potential don’t use it and to find out if there is a pattern and therefore for something to be done e.g. if finance is an issue... ‘.

What did the young people hope would come out of the project?

The interviewees were all fairly unanimous when it came to their ideas and passions about what the purpose of the project was. There was a very strong feeling among the young people that simply conducting the NEETs and HE research was not enough and that something further should come of it. They felt that being involved in the project was one thing, but without the research going some way towards directly helping the NEETs or those who were seen as not having fulfilled their potential to go on to HE, it would have little value as far as they were concerned.

One of the interviewees was quoted as saying:

'[I] hope it goes further and there’s follow up and something positive will come out of it.’

Another said:

‘I hope the outcomes of the research go towards helping young people to move forward in life’.

What came across strongly in some of the interviews was the notion that the young people could not understand ‘research for research’s sake’. Three out of the eight young researchers highlighted this as something frustrating about the project itself. They felt the research they conducted would only have a real purpose if it was used to do further good and if this was not the case, then they deemed it a pointless exercise. Their comments included:

‘research doesn’t provide the service to do something
about it – that’s frustrating for me because I want to help them’.

‘[The researchers are] not doing enough with the information. It could be used to educate others. I feel the authorities just put money into the project and don’t take it far enough. I just wanted to be able to refer people on.’

‘But what is going to happen with this research?’

This sense of frustration from conducting research but not being able to help their peers there and then was mentioned three times in the interviews by different young people. One young person said:

‘We were given some advice…on sign-posting people to relevant help….but in answer to some interviewees’ questions; ‘what are you going to do with this?’ and ‘what’s this going to do for me?’.

Another interviewee said;

‘The frustrating part was when the interviewees [said] ‘how are you going to help me? And I couldn’t directly ‘cos this was research, they’re helping us.’

Mentoring was a theme that also came up and three of the eight young researchers mentioned mentoring as an activity they had been involved in.

Success of the Reconnect Project Experience

The research team wanted to find out how successful the project had been from the community researchers’ perspective rather than from the point of view of the funders and commissioners. In order to get a picture of this, the interviews sought to uncover what the young researchers got out of the research activity and their thoughts on what was positive and negative about the project.

Undoubtedly the young researchers felt there were many positives to come out of the project. The interviews revealed that the researchers saw these successes on several different levels. Some of the researchers saw the success of the project in terms of their academic and professional development and something they could learn from, with one girl saying ‘I’d never done anything like this before so it was a good experience and [a] start to this kind of work. I’d never had this sort of responsibility’.

In the interviews, the researchers also talked about the project on a more personal level and how the experience had helped them develop as people; for example, many of the young researchers felt that taking part in the project had increased their confidence and developed their communication skills. The personal effect the project had upon the young researchers is clearly evident in this comment made by one interviewee: ‘I used to be quiet and shy…I never talked a lot or asked about what was on my mind. Now…it’s developed me and made me more confident.’

It was not just this particular interviewee who was affected, as four out of the eight interviewees mentioned improved confidence as a result of participating in the project. Two interviewees also mentioned that the work gave them a sense of pride; one highlighted her learning from the project and the effect this had upon her, saying ‘[I’m] proud of what I’ve done and now I know what to do and how to prepare if I do anything like this again’. Another was quoted as saying that taking part in the project had given her ‘a sense of pride and achievement’.

For one of the researchers in particular, the project helped to fuel her ambition;

‘It made me more determined to go on to a degree and then move onto a job I can be proud of’.

Another positive outcome of the project which emerged through the interviews was the fact that many of the young people picked up skills and experience which they could use later in life. Examples given by the young people were;

• enhancing their CV;
• developing their interview skills;
• and picking up skills and experience which they felt would be useful in future job roles/university courses.
Conclusions

One final ‘off topic’ conclusion that the two practitioners were able to draw from their investigative project related to the young participants’ attitudes to research itself. The resounding view from all eight of the young people interviewed was that research is only of any value if some activity or ‘good’ will take place as a result. While this highlights the young people’s frustrations arising from the project, it also brings to light the passion and enthusiasm which they had for both the project itself and for their community; it was this enthusiasm and genuine interest in their own community, coupled with their enjoyment of this opportunity to mix with different communities, that were the key messages for the practitioner researchers.
The preparedness of Level 3 students commencing onto Level 4 Foundation Degrees within a South Yorkshire Further Education College

Andy Parkes, Business Development Advisor, Dearne Valley College

Introduction

The study was designed to discover whether learners commencing onto a part-time foundation degree (FD) in early years perceived themselves to be prepared, in terms of study skills, for the course of study. The researcher practitioner’s view is that they are not and, therefore, consideration should be given to activities and processes that may increase their level of ‘preparedness’. The researcher practitioner’s view is based on not only experiences of some specific higher education (HE) courses of study delivered within an FE context but also on the benchmark descriptors for FD and, for example, typical examples of the unit descriptors for level 3 BTEC National Certificate/Diplomas as well as informal discussions with other practitioners.

Background

The Dearne Valley College first became a College of Further Education in 1976 when Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council established the Rockingham College of Further Education. It was incorporated in 1993, following the 1993 Further Education Act introduced by the then Conservative Government and was renamed Dearne Valley College in September 1996.

The College provides a range of vocational qualifications and secured HE funding to run full-time HE courses in 1999 having successfully run part-time HE programmes since 1994. This provision has expanded with 200+ students enrolling on Travel and Tourism, Sports Science, Business, Management, Computing and Public Services. The HE cohort is made up of many students who have progressed through the College as well as students from the local community and schools.

In September 2008, the College launched its first Foundation Degree programme, the FD in Sports Coaching (Performance and Participation), with a FD in Early Years following in January 2009. Further developments are planned for additional provision to replace all of the existing Higher National Certificates (HNC) and Diplomas (HND) by September 2010.

The Dearne Valley borders the three local authorities of Barnsley, Rotherham and Doncaster and suffers unemployment rates above the national average. For example, within Rotherham the unemployment rate between April 2008 and March 2009 was 8.6% against 7.1% for the Yorkshire and Humber region and 6.2% for Great Britain (www.nomisweb.co.uk).

In light of the above and the current economic climate, the local provision of both further and higher education, with progression routes from pre-entry to level 4 and level 5, is most important to the development of the area given the attendant costs involved for travel and/or accommodation at other out-of-area locations. Numerous students start at College on level 1 or 2 qualifications and continue for three to five years to achieve level 3 and possibly 4 qualifications. In addition, the College’s fees are competitively priced in comparison with the first two years of a traditional undergraduate programme.

Within the College, the practitioner researcher is responsible for the programme leadership of the part-time HNC in Business, the delivery of a variety of modules for the full-time HND in Business, the full-time HND in Travel and Tourism Management and significant amounts of in-company training and development. Additionally, the practitioner researcher is largely responsible for the design, development and validation of a part-time FD in Business and Management to be launched in September 2010.

Research Questions

Within the context described above the practitioner researcher is, therefore, interested to discover if level 3 entrants perceive that they are prepared - in terms of study skills - for the demands of HE at the start of their programme in order to inform and influence design and development of the part-time FD in Business and Management.

The purpose of this study was to identify the students’ perceptions of their level of preparedness, if the College provided sufficient direction, development and support
to meet their needs.

The Research

The focus of the study was a group of 13 students undertaking a FD in Early Years on a part-time basis. The College Management Information System (CMIS) revealed that the student group commenced with 15 students, although 2 students have withdrawn, 1 due to the unsuitability of the course and 1 for personal reasons. The group involved in the research thus comprised 13 females and ranged in age from 21 to 50 years with a mean age of 30 years. The ethnic origin of the group was entirely White British. All students possessed an appropriate level 3 qualification (11 - BTEC National Certificate or Diploma, 1 NVQ Level 3 and 1 Level 3 NNEB); no student joined the programme on the basis of experience alone.

In the absence of any other part-time FD courses within the College, the study was a snapshot or cross-sectional in its duration. Equally, given the time constraints and opportunities for access to the students, it was felt that the appropriate method was a focus group followed up by in-depth interviews.

In theory, access may need to be agreed at numerous levels (Gray 2009) including the individuals themselves. In order for the study to take place, the practitioner researcher had to negotiate access firstly with the Course Leader who Saunders, in Jupp (2006), would describe as the “gatekeeper” (p.126). For this study, having received an explanation of its nature and scope, the Course Leader was open and receptive to the research taking place and, therefore, access to the students was not an issue. However, student agreement to participate was, potentially, another issue. Gray (2009) talks of the need to engage individuals as ‘participants’ rather than ‘subjects’. Sikes, in Opie (2004) suggests that often participants cannot say no. This was not this case for this study, students had the opportunity to withdraw. That none chose to do so may have been influenced by the knowledge that the Course Leader had agreed to access and/or the fact the group are mature students who are confident enough to speak their own mind and withdraw should they wish. Equally, the participants did not know the practitioner researcher and, therefore, there was no emotional obligation to participate.

In the absence of any College policy or documentation for research, the practitioner researcher adapted an informed consent form using the example provided by Gray (2009, pp.393) for both the focus group and the subsequent in-depth interviews. Prior to the commencement of the focus group, the practitioner researcher explained the rationale behind the study with the stipulation that students did not have to participate and were free to leave at anytime. The focus group took place on the 8th July 2009. The participants were comfortably seated in the seminar room in which they study and were seated in such a way that they could see each other and the practitioner researcher (Wellington, 2000). The student group gave their views freely and all contributed.

The practitioner researcher is grateful that all students were happy to participate and granted informed consent. The data collected was qualitative and consisted of focus group and interview transcripts.

Following the focus group, 4 students volunteered to participate in the interviews. The practitioner researcher was anxious to avoid intimidating the students, and therefore, undertook the interviews at the students’ workplace on the 17th August 2009.

Data Analysis

The practitioner researcher set out to record the focus group using a digital recorder. However, the equipment failed and the practitioner researcher was required to make hand-written notes of the discussions. For the in-depth interviews, the practitioner researcher took hand written notes rather than risk equipment failure again.

Findings

Focus Group

The focus group revealed that some students were given study time by their employer, some were funded by their employer and some received neither time nor funding.

Some of the group had attended a number of study skills sessions (4 x 3 hours) prior to the commencement of the course. These sessions were delivered by the head of the Learning Research Centre (LRC). Some students missed
these sessions due to not having enrolled or not having
decided to do the course at the time the sessions were
delivered. The sessions included the following topics:
using the LRC, essay writing, using the internet and
referencing. Additionally, some study skills sessions were
delivered as part of the course induction. The group
stated that they felt the sessions delivered as part of the
course induction functioned better than the study skills
sessions as they were contextualised to their course of
study whereas the initial sessions, whilst good, were
generalised.

The group revealed that time management was an issue in
terms of managing to do the research, read and then
write the assessment given the demands to attend
College, the demands of their employment and family
commitments. Returning to study was an issue for three
or four of the students along with the fact that the
course is at a higher level than previously studied.

One issue that emerged strongly was around access to
the LRC. The course operates on an afternoon and
evening basis from 1630 until 2100. Currently, the LRC
opens at 2030 and therefore the only opportunity the
students have to go to the LRC is before the sessions
start or during break time. Neither was deemed to be
suitable as the students are often coming straight from
work and are, therefore, rushing to the session or having
something to eat and drink at break – again an issue for
students who may have been at work from 0730 and will
be studying until 2100.

The availability of resources was also an issue highlighted
by the group in terms of the number of books, the loan
period and the fact that some are for reference or on-site
use only.

Finally, the group suggested that some type of written
exercise before the course started would be useful in
helping students to gauge the level of study they were
about to commence.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the practitioner researcher offers the
following thoughts as a result of the study:

1. The study is a snapshot only of one group of FD
students at DVC. It is not a longitudinal study and
therefore the findings of this study may not be
replicated with other groups at DVC and/or other
colleges.

2. The study did not seek out the views of other FD
learners as the group studied were the only part-
time FD students. However, it may have been
useful to speak with other FD students at DVC in
order to test out the findings.

3. In terms of the study, the findings would suggest
support for the practitioner researcher’s view that
students are not always prepared for the course
they are about to commence.

Recommendations

As a result of the study, the practitioner researcher would
suggest the following actions:

1. Test out the findings with another full-time FD
group within DVC in order to see if the same issues
emerge and to see whether the issues are
institutionally related or related to the mode of
study.

2. Test out the findings with another part-time FD
group at another college (access permitting) in
order to see if the same issues emerge and to see
whether the issues are vocationally related.

3. The study skills sessions offered should be
contextualised to, and delivered by, the vocational
area being studied and not offered as a ‘one size
fits all approach’.

4. Equally, the opportunity for students to undertake
a piece of written work, with feedback provided,
to be incorporated into study skills sessions either
prior to the start of the course or during induction.

5. Invitations to such sessions should be issued in a
timely and consistent manner in order that all
learners have the opportunity to attend.

6. Study skills sessions to be available via the on-line
learning platform “Moodle” in order that they are
available for future reference but not at the
expense of traditional delivery methods.

7. Access to the LRC to be available within the
weekly course sessions.
8. Consistency of referencing to be clarified.

9. Investigate the availability of resources and the loan arrangements – this is particularly important for part-time employed learners who have fewer opportunities to attend.

10. Investigate the opportunity for increased opening hours for the LRC.

11. The unrelated issue of food provision for part-time students warrants further internal discussion given the times of day and nature of the students attending such courses.

The practitioner researcher wishes to acknowledge with thanks the contributions made by the group and the access provided by the course leader.

Finally, the opportunity to undertake the research has provided an interesting opportunity for the practitioner researcher for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it has without doubt provided the opportunity to reflect upon the needs of part-time students in terms of the preparation to study they may require. In that respect, the practitioner researcher believes future course design will be better informed and, as a result, provide a better experience for the students. Secondly, the practitioner researcher has gained much from the research experience in reflecting on the various research philosophies, approaches, strategies and methods.

Most significantly, it has been a cathartic experience. Having undertaken a less-than-good student experience at Postgraduate level a number of years ago, which reinforced many of the anxieties from primary school, the research project has provided an opportunity for the practitioner researcher to re-discover the joy of learning and re-build both self-esteem and the belief that he could succeed at this level.

In that respect, the support and encouragement of both the research project leaders and the MA APSE course leader cannot and should not be underestimated. To have undertaken the research, to have people interested in what has been done, to participate in the Learning and Skills Research Conference, to have the research published within the report and to have completed the accompanying MA APSE module would not have seemed possible twelve months ago.

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In accordance with our ethos of ‘learning from and with each other’ we felt it was crucial that the reflections of those directly involved were sought, in order to find out what practitioners felt about taking part in the programme. Practitioners’ views were gathered in a range of ways including informal and ongoing feedback, drawing on written accounts, telephone interviews and a focus group held at the final group meeting. Data was recorded, collated and analysed thematically.

Practitioners were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences of taking part in the programme and undertaking an individual project. Their reflections highlighted a range of positive outcomes - as well as challenges. Emerging themes included: motivations for getting involved, research training, one to one support, practitioner research group meetings, accreditation, resources, rewards, challenges, and impact of taking part in the programme.

**Motivation for involvement**

The reasons cited for involvement in the project appear to relate principally to personal development and/or the wish to gain more insight into a particular area. When asked why they had become involved in the project one of the most common reasons included the opportunity the project gave practitioners to reflect on and review practice. For example, one practitioner highlighted:

‘You don’t always have the chance to reflect on... ‘why I am doing this?’... and think ‘is it making a difference?’ and to actually sit and think ‘what I am doing?’... and ‘is this working?’ is an unusual opportunity’

Several practitioners articulated that they hoped the research would have an impact on either the field as a whole or their students more directly through changes in practice; in fact just over a quarter highlighted that a motivation to take part was the belief that involvement in the project would support their practice:

‘Somewhere what we are learning may end up in some policy somewhere we hope’

‘Really it was to inform curriculum development’

‘It was supporting what I do with students 14-19, and not just my work but the team I work in’

‘A key motivation was to enhance the student experience’

‘I did hope that it might be useful to the people that I was doing the research on’

Just under half of the practitioners noted that the project was an interesting opportunity and one practitioner highlighted that the project was ‘something different from everyday work’. Several practitioners stressed their motivations in terms of personal development, with one participant commenting that she wanted to ‘do something practical and of use to me personally’. Indeed, several practitioners stated that the chance to learn something and gain new skills was also a motivation:

‘I was keen to widen my experience really...I t was a good opportunity to try something different and gain interview and research experience’

We have found that practitioners have clear and strong motivations for getting involved in our programme. These findings were very much in keeping with those described within the PLRI and the recent LSIS report, which suggest that engaging practitioners to participate in research is not difficult. The LSIS report asserts that ‘consultees felt that engaging participants was not particularly an issue’. This is a subject we return to in the final section of this report.

**The model**

As outlined in Section 1 a number of different models and approaches to support practitioner research have been developed in recent years. Our model incorporated a range of activities including: training and planning sessions, ongoing 1:1 support (via email and telephone and face to face meetings) and opportunities for peer learning via group meetings. Participants were asked to reflect on the usefulness of these elements and their reflections are summarised below.

**Research workshops**

A series of initial research training sessions kick-started
the project, arranged over a period of two months and taking the form of four half-day workshops. On the whole these were appreciated and felt to be of value, with one respondent commenting ‘I liked the two or three I went to and it meant you bonded with people at the workshop and that was a real bonus’. However, many of the practitioners expressed their frustration at not being able to attend the entire series of training events.

Major barriers to attending the sessions appear to have been teaching commitments and other prioritised meetings. One practitioner stated ‘I didn’t make any of the initial meetings due to a timetable issue back at College because of teaching commitments’ and another reported ‘It was difficult to attend all of them just because you had other meetings and other commitments you have to go to as part of your job’

In relation to the workshop series structure, it was suggested by several practitioners that it might have been more useful to have one intensive day of training followed up over the course of the project by additional sessions as required, for example:

‘I think it might have worked better if you had it on one full day and you could have set aside that rather than splitting it into four workshops... sometimes setting a day aside is much easier’

However when this model was suggested to the practitioner group as a whole there were mixed reactions. One practitioner reflected:

‘If you weren’t able to go to the one day you would have missed out though...and one day could be overwhelming as well’

‘I couldn’t attend all of them...but no way would be perfect as they are competing with other priorities...on reflection 1 day or 2 half days would be appropriate’

‘I like the idea of an intensive day... although it was fine as it was’.

When asked about the content of the workshops, practitioners were again mixed in their views. The majority were positive about the content and comments included:

‘I think it was quite helpful for me and brought me up to speed really and was a good refresher... some bits I knew very well... and some bits were thought provoking’

‘Brilliant, I attended three of them’

‘Ones I attended were useful’

One or two participants felt that not all the speakers were as effective, while several practitioners highlighted a particular speaker as being impressive. One respondent stressed she would have liked more practical activities included in the workshops, while another practitioner suggested it would have been useful to have incorporated the experiences of a practitioner researcher who had conducted such research:

‘I think it would have been nice to have heard someone first hand who had actually done it to give you some hope you might be able to do it’

Several practitioners described how they did find the initial workshops overwhelming:

‘Those four sessions seemed to go from getting your idea to writing up all in one fell swoop and it was a bit overwhelming and I thought how am I going to manage this?’

‘It was quite daunting all the stuff you got thrown at you and the key stuff was the practical stuff’

‘It was really interesting - don’t get me wrong - but I also found it really daunting’

‘Initially I was quite daunted as felt in the company of people who were more experienced than myself but thought it was a good introduction to the project itself’

1 to 1 support

All of the practitioner participants were overwhelmingly positive about the one to one support offered by the research development officers (RDOs). Indeed, as highlighted in the LSIS report (p.26) a good relationship between those managing such a programme and practitioner researchers is a key enabling factor. Within our programme the flexibility of the support offered
seems to have been particularly valued and practitioners’ comments on this included:

’It was all entirely helpful… you could have individual sessions when you needed it’

’The support provided was very flexible so I could access it when it suited me’

In addition, the RDOs’ role seems to have played a key role in supporting practitioners to sustain their efforts. One commented that the support was ‘thorough and it made me get the job done’, while another reported that it had enabled her to move from a mindset of thinking she wasn’t able to complete the project to one of persevering with the work:

’I decided I couldn’t do it… but it was you two who really made me think about keeping on going… and I would like to thank you for that… without that support I don’t think many of us would be here’

Practitioners described the support in a number of other ways including: ‘timely’; ‘encouraging’; ‘kind’; ‘firm’; ‘useful’; and ‘appropriate’.

One practitioner did however highlight that although the support was appropriate and supportive, it wasn’t always possible to convey the difficulties of completing this type of work within the normal working week which often consisted of dealing with unplanned interruptions.

On-going research practitioner research group meetings

Research practitioners clearly valued the chance to meet up regularly to discuss their projects with each other and the RDOs. One practitioner described every meeting as ‘useful in one way or another’. However, as with the initial training workshops, there were some issues with actually finding the time to attend these meetings. One practitioner highlighted that she would have liked to have attended more of the on-going sessions and reported that it was frustrating having to prioritise other things. When asked how this could have been alleviated she was not sure.

As with the training workshops some of the practitioners did find these meetings a bit daunting at times. As reported by one practitioner:

’I think what did intimidate me sometimes was our own little group because I would be thinking I haven’t done anything and everybody else has! Then I was slightly reassured because there were other people around the table who were saying I haven’t done things and some that had…strangely enough I felt quite nervous about those sessions because I hadn’t moved things on in the way that I had wanted’

One practitioner reported that perhaps the on-going meetings would have been more useful if she had a clear idea about what she could get out of each meeting.

When asked about the regularity of meetings the majority of practitioners felt that bi-monthly or quarterly meetings would be the most appropriate.

Accreditation

It was envisaged that accreditation would be a key feature of the programme. However, in the event only one practitioner gained accreditation for their investigative project – having undertaken one module of the MA in Applied Professional Studies in Education (APSE) at The University of Sheffield. It is worth noting that in the PLRI, a programme involving a far greater number of practitioners, only two participants took up the offer of accreditation via a Postgraduate Research methods module.

The reasons for not taking up the offer of accreditation were explored within our group and it was largely felt that lack of time was the limiting factor, with participants already working to full capacity.

The practitioner who did complete the module reported positively on the experience of undertaking the course and said that it underpinned what he needed to do when carrying out his investigative project:

’It was spot on and it underpinned from a knowledge and understanding point of view what I needed to do…. delivery was great, really stimulating and because it was delivered at the weekend it fitted in nicely and we got remote access to the tutors. The course has a really
nice feel to it and the kinds of atmosphere created amongst the programme team and learners is very encouraging and supportive which is helpful... I am on with the next module now the Professional Development Module...

Resources

When asked what resources practitioners had used to help them undertake their investigative project, the vast majority highlighted that the PLRI publication had been very useful. In fact more than one practitioner described this publication as their ‘bible’. One practitioner highlighted that the Aimhigher website was also a useful resource, whilst another referred to the links for publications and academic journals sent out by the research development officers. The practitioner who undertook the MA in APSE module also stressed that he used much of the material underpinning the course to support him with his project.

Rewards

When reflecting on the most rewarding part of the programme, practitioners identified a number of elements. Several practitioners related their experiences to improved research capacity, with two practitioners highlighting that developing research skills and knowledge was of benefit. One commented that ‘it felt rewarding to have something like that under my belt and rewarding to put it on my CV. I felt proud on the Higher Futures celebration day knowing I was part of the project’.

A further practitioner reported a sense of satisfaction from doing something different from his usual role and in addition practitioners highlighted that undertaking the research itself was rewarding, especially carrying out the interviews.

Being able to think more critically was mentioned by many practitioners and one practitioner highlighted it was the most rewarding part of participating in the programme. He commented:

‘... to inform curriculum design and to think more critically about the kinds of things people need. As always it is often the small things that make a difference and the things we miss or take for granted particularly for part-time learners. You have to think critically about the needs of part-time learners. It is easy to think that part-time have the same access and opportunity than full-time people have. Our learning resource centre is not even open at weekends so the only time this group I looked can get in is weekdays eve’.

In particular, one practitioner highlighted that it was rewarding to ‘link in with my job role ...it’s a different way of getting feedback from students that you work with on a daily basis’. This chance to reflect more critically was appreciated by many of the practitioners within our programme and aligns closely with the experiences of practitioners reported within the PLRI (p.21) where:

‘Many of the practitioner researchers had enjoyed the challenge of taking a more deliberately analytical examination of a situation, one that differed from the type of information collection usually associated with the practitioner roles’

Practitioners highlighted that meeting other colleagues throughout the programme had also been very enjoyable.

Challenges

When asked to reflect upon the most difficult thing about undertaking research of this type three key issues were described: time; getting started; and writing up.

Just over a third of practitioners reported that the time to get on and complete the project was the most significant challenge faced. When asked how much time they had spent taking part in the research, participants struggled to provide an answer. Those practitioners who did hazard a guess (4 in total) all thought the project had taken them at least 2 full weeks in working time (full time equivalent).

One practitioner highlighted that time to focus on it was difficult to come by and from her point of view better time management may have helped. A further practitioner stressed that lack of time available to do the project was a major issue:

‘The nature of my job role and the unpredictable and
fluctuating nature of emerging issues meant there would likely be conflict in terms of time available to allocate to the work. I prefer to have clear periods of time to deal with issues such as research to reflect and mull over issues. This is in reality a luxury I don’t enjoy in this role.’

Another practitioner reported:

‘It’s balancing the needs of study requirements with everything else I have to do….the teaching commitment, business development and I have the Higher Futures commitment. It’s balancing all of that’

Over half the practitioners suggested the idea of a more formal obligation or contract in terms of hours.
Comments included:

‘I think the only thing is for it to be part of your role… rather than as add on…if it had been formally part of my hours that would have been easier’.

‘I think we should have negotiated some time if it were possible and I think we would have treated it more seriously, although I did take it seriously… if I had half a day to really focus on it, it would have made a difference’

‘Structure of it was a bit loose… if you had said this is a formal commitment in hours it might have worked better…as it stood it slipped off the list and I don’t think it would have done if there had been more formal contract’.

As well as lack of clear ‘contracted’ time to undertake the project practitioners described how ‘getting started’ with the project was especially hard. This was particularly in terms of identifying a specific research question; the freedom given to practitioners to research any aspect of their work within two very broad themes may have added to this challenge. Several practitioners commented on this issue, including:

‘It was almost cranking up… getting into it…once you got into it… I wouldn’t say it was easy but I found the most difficult thing was focusing on what I was going to do’

‘I agree… once you got past that blank piece of paper it is a lot easier to motivate yourself to do it… starting it off was definitely the most challenging bit’

‘Given previously outlined time constraints it was difficult to hone down the projected scope of the project to something workable, but yet provide some meaningful and worthwhile additional research information’

In common with the experiences of practitioners within the PRRI, a particular challenge reported was the process of writing up and two practitioners highlighted that this difficulty was linked to a lack of time. Comments included:

‘Writing up as I didn’t have enough time to do it…with the writing you just allow it to slide and it would have been good to have had more structure as you find 101 other things to do other than writing you literally have to lock yourself up and force yourself to do it’

‘Writing it up…for me it was the time element. At that point I had challenges and responsibilities and I really felt I just can’t do it. I felt the research development officers worked hard and had given a lot of valuable support and I felt I wanted to get it done as I didn’t want to let you down’

One practitioner reported that writing up for her was as challenging as getting started but also admitted that again it was linked to time:

‘It is equally challenging writing it up… the analysis and dealing with what you have now got in front of you and thinking – did I ask the right question, did I choose the right project in the end. How do I fit this information to my question rather than looking at what you have got and this is useful and maybe I should have a different question at the end of the day. I do think getting the time and space to think through what you are going to do and the physical writing-up of it…I don’t find writing things up particularly easy’

For one practitioner the difficulties of ‘getting written up’ was more an issue of confidence.

‘The interviews were fantastic and even transcribing… although it got a bit tedious… but the writing up and not feeling confident enough’
Impact on practitioners

Almost all the practitioner researchers reported that the programme has had an impact on them in terms of their personal and/or professional development (CPD). This is very much in keeping with the findings of the PLRI initiative (Hamilton & James, 2008) and the LSIS report (2009). The PLRI reported that effects and benefits of their programme included ‘increased confidence, integration of current research into their practice, recognising the importance of having more time for reflection and of engaging more proactively with individual learners’. The LSIS report highlights the potential of research undertaken with practitioners as a CPD and quality improvement tool and goes on to give examples where such approaches can have impact at the individual and institutional levels.

In our programme just over half of the practitioner researchers described the impact of the programme in terms of the way they ‘think’ or ‘feel’. For example, one practitioner highlighted that involvement had ‘stimulated my critical thinking’; another ‘it has made me feel differently about what we do’. Moreover, mirroring the outcomes of the PLRI, three practitioners explicitly highlighted the improvement in their confidence as a result of being part of the programme:

‘It has developed my research skills, restored my interest in learning and has rebuilt a bit of my shattered confidence’

‘It’s given a little bit of confidence and experience in something new’

‘I feel insecure about doing my own piece of work and the project was an in-road into this arena... coming from a practitioner background and being a primary school teacher I still feel insecure... I know it’s only a small piece of work but I have dipped my toes in the water and encouraged me to take a step further and feel more confident about what I am doing... I feel less insecure but still insecure!’

As well as what could be described as ‘softer’ outcomes, practitioners also described more tangible impacts. Like the PLRI project, which reported 75 percent of practitioners had changed their practice as a result of involvement in the initiative, our practitioners described changes they had made to practice. For example, one practitioner described how she now used more flexible approaches with students following the findings of her research project that had highlighted the time pressures and complications experienced by part time students. Another practitioner reported that because she works in a small team she has been able to embed her learning into her practice and also throughout her close team. A third participant described how her involvement in the programme had not only made her feel differently about her practice but also changed how she collected information. Furthermore, one practitioner based at an HE institution stated:

‘My whole approach to teaching and learning has changed... I have reflected very deeply in what I am doing and have made changes’. This practitioner went on to explain that she was moving away from thinking in terms of course content and was now focusing more on key study skills ‘it’s now about key study skills rather than content and what they (students) need to become autonomous learners... course content is not the starting point anymore and this is a significant change... and there has been a lot of discussion about this with colleagues as well...and they are beginning to change...it’s more of an enquiry based learning approach... a much bigger commitment to that’.

For some practitioners, involvement in the programme has led to new opportunities in terms of both research and learning opportunities. One practitioner reported that she was now leading on a university-wide research project. Another has registered to complete the MA course he started during the practitioner research programme (MA in Applied Professional Development).

Impact on practitioner institutions

There were mixed views amongst practitioners in terms of the impact of their individual projects on their own institutions. The issue of impact beyond the practitioner him or herself is closely linked to that of dissemination. It is of note that at the time of writing this report the final practitioner write-ups had not been disseminated widely within practitioner institutions but draft versions may have been shared with management and staff working closely with practitioners.

When asked about the potential of impact beyond their
own practice, views appeared to be related to the size of the organisation within which the practitioner was based. In particular, several of the practitioners who worked in large HE institutions reported that they were not confident about the impact of their own research on their institutions. One practitioner stated that ‘I have mentioned the project a few times and I am waiting for somebody to ask me what I have found... but nobody has yet’. She went on to highlight ‘In a large place like xxx... there are too many people delivering services to turn practices around and I think there are some things I can say but whether they will have an impact I just don’t know’.

In contrast to this view, most of the practitioners based at smaller FE institutions were much more confident about the impact of their research at the institutional level. Indeed, one practitioner stated that as a result of his project ‘we now recognize and can address the issue for part time provision and we are launching other programmes that may involve learners studying at weekends as well as during the week’.

Impact on the wider field

Very much in keeping with the findings of the PLRI (2008), practitioner views on the impact of individual projects on the wider field were tentative. The PLRI report states that the area the participants recorded most doubt about was the effectiveness and usefulness participation had on wider networks. Mirroring this, two practitioners involved in our programme stressed that they ‘hoped’ that their projects would impact upon the wider field but qualified this with comments relating to the extent of dissemination. Indeed, there was some cynicism from the rest of the group about the wider impact of individual projects; one practitioner highlighted:

‘I am not sure it would have that sort of impact. I would like to think it might make us think about outreach work that has been done with Higher Futures in terms of working with work-based learners and that interface between HE and FE...’

One practitioner made a number of different points in relation to wider impact. As illustrated in the quote below, this respondent hoped that practitioner research might gain momentum if:

- the projects were to be disseminated widely;
- practitioner research were to continue; and
- other practitioners were to generate similar findings:

‘I don’t think one research report by a careers advisor is going to change government policy BUT if it becomes wider... and practitioner research carries on... and people are contributing and it encourages other people to do similar things and then if everybody is saying the same thing... at some point somebody has to listen to that and take it seriously if people are coming out with similar conclusions’.

This echoes almost exactly the point made by practitioners involved in the PLRI (Impact Report 2008 p.10): ‘who felt that the cumulative effects of the small-scale research of which they were part could influence policy’.

Other outcomes

As well as those outlined above, a number of additional outcomes were reported by practitioners as having resulted from direct involvement in the programme including: increased attendance at conferences; reading more widely; and feeling more empowered in job roles. The two quotes below illustrate effectively the type of additional impact the programme has had on some of the participants:

‘It has empowered me a little bit in taking control in my job. Just because I tended to go along with the day to day...what has to be done... and it was nice to know there was this project that my input was important to...’

‘Certainly as a result of stimulating thinking and confidence it has driven me to attend more stuff and I have been to a conference during this time and it has got me back on the learning wagon again’.
Part 4: Research Development Officers’ reflections

In this section we report our reflections on the experience of developing and supporting a practitioner research programme within the widening participation sector. The section begins with a brief reflection upon the programme model adopted and goes on to discuss: engaging practitioners; supporting practitioners (research workshops, accreditation, 1 to 1 support, and group meetings); individual projects; our ethical approach; issues of quality and ownership; managing expectations; funding/staff time; dissemination; and the reflective practitioner. Finally, some conclusions are drawn about the overall impact of the programme.

‘Our model’

Looking at the key publications related to this area of work it becomes clear that there are a range of models to support and develop practitioner research programmes. As highlighted in the LSIS report there are some common features that characterise such programmes. These are:

- publishing a call for bids around a set of defined topic areas;
- putting in place a panel and processes to assess these bids;
- working collaboratively with practitioners to finalise their proposed projects and plans;
- contracting with the practitioners institutions where funding is involved;
- instituting on-going support and guidance mechanisms;
- monitoring the progress of projects; and
- quality assuring outputs to an agreed timescale.

Clearly our model does differ from the majority of large national programmes, not least because ours adopts a recruiting approach. However, there are some similarities, and our model did include: working collaboratively with practitioners; providing on-going support; monitoring of progress; and assuring quality.

So what makes for a successful practitioner research programme? Both the PLRI and LSIS initiatives report several key factors for developing successful programmes. The PLRI handbook (2007 p.9) described what they term an ‘ideal’ practitioner research programme as including:

- an experienced and high profile organising team based on, for example, a university well known in this field
- internal organisational support from senior managers who are keen for their staff to undertake practitioner research and then use the findings
- a work based problem or issue which practitioners think can be better managed or provided for as a direct result of research
- an adequate level of research support and funding which gives the impression that practitioner research is valuable and worth investing time and effort in.

At the December 2009 LSRN/NIACE conference Andrew Morris, one of the authors of the LSIS report, highlighted three elements that appear to be key to the success of practitioner research programmes. These are:

1. local senior management support;
2. methodological support e.g. through collaboration with an HEI;
3. peer support.

Our programme is characterised to a greater or lesser extent by all of the criteria detailed above. In relation to the key elements flagged up by Andrew Morris, our programme received strong support from senior management of the two initiatives; this certainly helped with the recruitment and retention of practitioners. In addition, practitioners were provided with flexible and individually tailored methodological and on-going support which, as noted earlier in Part 3 of this report, was highly valued. This support was provided by university-based staff members with a particular interest in, and experience of, practitioner and participatory research projects. However, one area of the programme proved less successful than we hoped – largely due to time constraints on participants. This related to peer support; although every effort was made to put peer support in place via initial workshops and ongoing group meetings we feel that the value of the programme would have been enhanced by increased activity in this area.
Engaging practitioners

Within our context it was envisaged by the Higher Futures and Aimhigher Directors that our programme would result in about half a dozen members of staff completing a research project. The key publications within this field report that there is a strong appetite among practitioners to undertake research projects and it appears that ‘selecting’ programmes such as the PLRI have received high levels of applications. Within our ‘recruiting’ programme it did not prove difficult to engage practitioners and, despite an initial uncertainty as to exactly how many practitioners would take up the opportunity, all those who wanted to develop an investigative project were supported.

As described earlier, the mechanisms for engaging practitioners included a series of seminar briefings and then a questionnaire and follow-up by the RDOs. The initial questionnaire sent out across the two initiatives was completed by 30 practitioners and – given that 13 went on to develop a project – this does suggest that there were prospective practitioner researchers within the two initiatives who were interested in developing a research project at that time, even if they did not get started on a project as part of this programme.

The RDOs felt that one practitioner group missing from our programme was that of school-based teachers working within the Aimhigher initiative. Although a couple of teachers had attended the initial seminar briefing, none went on to develop an investigative project relating to their Aimhigher work.

The recruiting process we adopted was appropriate for our programme given its scale and regional context. Furthermore, the inclusive nature of the approach adopted has allowed a practitioner rather than project centred strategy that we feel has enhanced the CPD of participants. Rather than working to a model which only sought to include high quality ‘projects’ we were very much concerned in developing practitioners’ research skills and travelling with them on their research journeys.

Research workshops

Careful planning had gone into the workshop series. Although the training workshop series were well attended (with a total of 37 practitioners attending one or more sessions) the RDOs did note that very few practitioners (5) were able to attend the full series of four half day workshops delivered over an eight-week period during the initial phase of the project. Thirteen practitioners were only able to attend 1 workshop. Feedback from practitioners suggests that it was pressure of work and the need to prioritise other duties that prevented them from attending, rather than lack of interest on their part towards their research project and/or towards learning from - and contributing to - discussion with other colleagues taking part in the programme. On reflection the decision to hold four half day sessions was perhaps not the most effective way to deliver the workshops but it was felt to be the pragmatic option at the time.

When asked to reflect on their experience at the end of the programme, several practitioners suggested that it may have been more useful to have one intensive day of training followed by additional sessions during the lifetime of the programme. The RDOs felt - and still feel - that trying to encapsulate all aspects of the research in ‘one fell swoop’ would be too much to cover within one session, although a greater focus on regular, ongoing workshops on relevant topics may have improved the effectiveness of the programme. Perhaps a greater clarity at the start of the programme about the number of meetings, time commitment involved and topics to be covered would have been helpful in allowing participants to plan ahead and maximise chances of being able to attend sessions. Our feeling at the time was to adopt a more flexible, organic approach - a ‘needs-led’ model.

Accreditation

The number of practitioners who completed the module was lower than expected, with only one practitioner completing the MA module. As highlighted in Part 3, lack of time appears to be the main reason for low take up of the offer of accreditation. However, the practitioner who undertook the module reported that the experience had been extremely positive and supported the activities on this programme; moreover it had rekindled his desire to continue with studying and led to the individual registering to complete the full MA programme the following year.
1 to 1 support

Without a doubt, for the RDOs this has been the most rewarding part of the project. Being located at a local HE institution meant that support could be provided to practitioners ‘on the doorstep’. As highlighted in Part 1, the support was individually tailored and flexible according to individual research practitioner’s needs. Indeed, this element of the programme was clearly valued by practitioners; as reported in Part 3 all of the participants were overwhelmingly positive about the support, and it seems that this support played a key role in sustaining motivation and effort throughout the programme.

Group meetings

Group meetings were held periodically for practitioners to discuss research being undertaken and share experiences. These were on occasion poorly attended with only a small core group of practitioners taking part regularly. The RDOs did check with practitioners the best time for meetings and varied the location and times of meetings but, despite these efforts, the core group of attendees did not change significantly. An initial analysis revealed that those attending regularly consisted mainly of those on full time Higher Futures and/or Aimhigher contracts. It may be that staff only working fractionally for one or both of the two initiatives found attendance too difficult to factor into their multiple roles.

It was anticipated at the beginning of the programme that group meetings would provide practitioners with a valuable chance to share experiences and lead to opportunities for peer learning. Hamilton, James and Davies (2007 p.19) reflect that midpoint meetings within their programme were used to ‘renew enthusiasm, swap anecdotes and share successes and concerns’. Although practitioners within our programme who attended regularly did value group the meetings and described them as ‘useful in one way or another’ this is one of the areas of the programme that the RDOs felt could have been more effective - especially since there was potential for synergy between several projects, for example participants researching within the Early Years field. On reflection, given that practitioners could meet the RDO’s on a 1 to 1 basis as and when needed, it is perhaps understandable that group meetings were not always prioritised.

Scope and content of individual projects

What did the individual practitioners focus upon in their research? Looking through the different investigative projects, they cover a range of topics; one gives voice to employers in relation to their perceptions of vocational learning and higher level skills, while another seeks the views of parents and a third the views of members of a minority ethnic group. But perhaps the most striking feature is that the majority of the studies concern the views, either directly or indirectly, of the ‘community of learners’ on services provided by the practitioners in relation to progression and transition to HE. As such they have the potential to provide a useful evaluative resource not only to the practitioners themselves but also to their organisations and initiatives.

An ethical approach

The approach taken by the two RDOs has developed over a number of years working together on a wide variety of projects, predominantly qualitative and participatory in nature. A key feature of these projects has been an emphasis on co-research with practitioners and/or parents and very young children. Building on this experience of working with and supporting those involved in the research process, the RDOs took forward an approach which encouraged ethical research which is inclusive and encouraged learning from and with each other.

Having worked in ethically sensitive areas in many previous projects the RDOs feel strongly that ethics has to be a key consideration in any research activity. As highlighted by Groundwater Smith and Mockler (2007) ‘ethics is not merely a series of boxes to be ticked as a set of procedural conditions’ and it is of note that, on an on-going basis during this project, the relationship between quality and ethics has been explored both in terms of the work undertaken by the RDOs and also in terms of their role in supporting practitioner researchers to carry out individual investigative projects.

The challenge of developing ethical procedures at both programme and project level has already been referred to in Part 1. This was resolved by following the University of Sheffield’s ethical review process at programme level and by signing up the practitioner researchers to an ethics protocol at project level. However, in our view,
just as important as the handling of procedural aspects of research was the fostering of an ethos, an ethical approach, among the programme participants. Practitioners were encouraged to consider ethical issues at every stage of their research journey.

One scenario that arose during the writing up process provides an example of how this approach operated; one of the practitioners noted in his write up that ‘Gray (2009) talks of the need to engage individuals as ‘participants’ rather than ‘subjects’. Sikes, in Opie (2004) suggests that often participants cannot say no. This was not the case for this study, students had the opportunity to withdraw.’ We explored this assertion with the practitioner, encouraging him to examine in depth just how free the participants were to say ‘no’ to continuing their involvement in his research. However, a week or so later, this scenario was echoed in relation to the extent to which practitioners felt able to say ‘no’ to continuing their involvement in the programme as a whole; another practitioner researcher reported feeling unable to withdraw from the programme because the research officers had put so much effort into encouraging the participants with their projects!

Wherever possible, the RDOs aim to be inclusive in their practice and in our programme this has been operationalised in a number of ways. For example, all individuals included in the databases of the two initiatives were invited to take part in the project, regardless of specific role within the initiatives or previous research experience. In addition, the initial seminar briefing was held at various times and dates in order to maximise attendance. The practitioners who went on to undertake a small scale investigative project came from a range of backgrounds including FE tutors, university lecturers, widening participation projects management, information, advice and guidance specialists, etc. Our aim to be as inclusive as possible was not limited to our own work; throughout the project we tried to encourage awareness of inclusive practice amongst the practitioners while undertaking research.

Building good working relationships with the practitioners was also felt to be a priority for the research officers, who believed the project ethos should be one of learning from and with each other; the NRDC PLRI practitioner research handbook (Davies, Hamilton and James, 2007) provides a useful working definition of practitioner researchers that sums up the ethos on this project, describing them as ‘colleagues who are contributing a particular type of experience and expertise to a joint project’.

‘Getting Started’

Practitioners reported that ‘getting started’ was one of the most challenging aspects of taking part. It is worth noting that the initial email about the programme invited practitioners to develop their own project ideas around two very broad themes: ‘community of learners’ and ‘progression and transition to HE’. Perhaps the very wide remit contributed to the challenge faced by practitioners in identifying their own area of research.

Issues of ‘quality’ and ‘ownership’

As highlighted in Part 1, there are debates surrounding the quality of much practitioner research, and within our programme there was a tension relating to the balance between enhancing the rigour of the research while maintaining the practitioners’ ‘ownership’ of their work. A challenge for us throughout the project was how much guidance should be given to practitioners? This issue was present at all stages of the projects, i.e. deciding on the research question, planning the research design, developing fieldwork tools, analysing data and presenting and writing up findings.

At the start of the programme, participants were invited to come up with and develop their own project ideas and the RDOs encouraged them to think through what would be useful for them to explore in relation to their own practice, both in workshop sessions and in 1 to 1 meetings. In the workshops, RDOs tried to cover a range of different types of research; it seemed important not to be prescriptive but to encourage practitioners to choose a methodology which they felt comfortable with and which helped them to address their research question or issue. That said, by giving guidance, researchers have impacted upon each of the projects to a greater or lesser extent.

The question of how much guidance should be given to practitioners by those supporting a practitioner research programme is addressed in the PLRI handbook (Davies, Hamilton and James 2007 p.13) which identifies three possible responses.
These are described as:

- ‘nip the problem in the bud’;
- ‘don’t rock the boat’; and
- ‘let events take their course’.

The first response was to ‘nip the problem in the bud’. As outlined in the handbook, the positive outcome of this approach was ‘problem solved and avoid knock-on difficulties’. The possible negative effect – ‘damages enthusiasm and motivation’ may have been avoided on the whole (this is backed up by the reflections of practitioners as outlined in Part 3) and in fact it could be argued that it might be more damaging to time-constrained practitioners’ motivation to have their research derailed by problems that were foreseen by the research officers. Moreover, it would not have felt in line with ethical approach to have kept concerns private, instead, the RDOs tried to explore potential issues and pitfalls during planning discussions with practitioners. Finally, given the time constraints on both ourselves and on the practitioners to undertake their projects, it seemed the natural and most effective approach.

From the outset, practitioners within the programme were concerned that their small-scale studies would be judged by the same criteria as academic research. It was anticipated that projects would vary in quality, and if judged by traditional academic standards criticism could be levelled at the studies for a variety of reasons, including:

- focus on an area that is already well-researched;
- limited size of study; and
- lack of reference to the wider literature.

The RDOs emphasised to practitioners the value of carrying out a trawl of relevant literature and activity relating to the area they were researching. As perhaps might be expected within a programme such as this, some participants had conducted more extensive literature searches than others.

Despite criticisms that could be levelled, the evidence suggests that the research undertaken within this programme has been useful, not only in illuminating and adding to the existing work in the field but also – and crucially - developing participants’ awareness and skills as reflective practitioners and improving the quality of services.

Managing expectations

The two RDOs were engaged on the basis of 1.25 days per week each and it was difficult for them to meet their own expectations around what could be achieved in the time available. There was also an issue in terms of the expectations of the practitioners around the scope of their own investigative projects. The PLRI reports were useful here in confirming the RDOs own experiences in relation to the length of time needed to plan, carry out, report and disseminate research; on numerous occasions and at all stages throughout the research process it was necessary to rein in the expectations of the practitioners around the scope of their projects.

The pro-forma produced by the RDOs and completed in consultation with the practitioner researchers proved useful in terms of keeping research projects manageable and realistic.

Funding and staff time

Throughout the literature in this field a common theme that emerges relates to time pressures – how do practitioners fit research activities into their already full workload? It was no surprise that over a third of our practitioner research group reported that finding the time to carry out and complete their projects was one of the most significant challenges that they faced in relation to this work. Even on a more extensively funded programme like the PLRI, it is interesting that one of the issues for discussion at a key meeting for individuals supporting the research projects related to time. The item for discussion was ‘The importance of time and timing more generally … can money buy it?’

This is an important question; does more funding really equate to more capacity in terms of time available to undertake research? In our programme, the HF Director’s continuing support for the work of the RDOs on this programme included an email sent out to practitioner researchers offering to negotiate with their institution to enable them to carry out their research projects. Even with this offer, it was still a considerable challenge for the participants to complete their projects; any time that
is not spent on core roles has a knock-on effect and work still has to be done – somehow.

Writing up

The issue of ‘ownership’ was at its most salient in terms of the writing process. Not only did the practitioner researchers find this one of the most challenging aspects of their project, but the RDOs found that contributing appropriately could be difficult. We tried to be sensitive to practitioners’ needs and wishes, as participants varied greatly in the level of support they asked for and/or needed in terms of report writing. This resulted in more input from the RDOs to some write-ups than others.

As well as proving challenging, the writing up process was also time-consuming for both practitioners and RDOs alike. It is interesting that the PLRI Impact report highlights feedback from practitioner researchers who were taken aback by the length of time the whole process of drafting and redrafting can take when different people are involved.

In the early stages we introduced the idea of more innovative types of research (Dadds, 1995). However, there seemed to be a lack of interest in less traditional approaches to research and, in practice, it felt appropriate for the RDOs to provide a framework for the write-ups, which the majority of practitioner researchers used as a guide.

Dissemination

In addition to this publication, the RDOs explored possible dissemination opportunities as the programme evolved. Practitioners presented their findings at both the 2009 national LLN conference in Birmingham and the December 2009 LSrn/Niace conference ‘Changing World, Changing Research: Keeping Abreast of Research in the Learning and Skills Sector’. One practitioner held a workshop - attended by around 30 participants - disseminating the intermediate findings of his research at the UVAC conference in York in November 2008. Each practitioner project is listed on the LLN National Research Forum’s website within their repository of research and a couple of practitioners’ projects have been recommended for inclusion in an eBook providing research evidence from LLNs.

Although the LLN National research forum allowed us to begin dissemination into the wider field, and the publication of this report will allow the project findings to receive an audience within participant institutions, the level of knowledge and understanding about the research within their own organisations has been largely dependent upon the practitioners’ own efforts to spread the information. Perhaps a greater emphasis on communication between the RDOs at the University of Sheffield and the relevant individuals at senior management level might have enhanced the impact of the programme.

The reflective practitioner

As stated previously, the aim of the programme was to encourage and facilitate deeper reflection on practice. In their book ‘Practitioner Research and Professional Development in Education’, Campbell, Mcnamara and Gilroy (2004) discuss the work of the American Donald Schon, who introduced the concept of the reflective practitioner.

According to Campbell et al (2004), the reflective practitioner ‘is by definition a researcher, researching not just their own professional context but, crucially, researching that context as they act within it. Moreover, they may be doing this at a tacit level without realising that they are adjusting their behaviour to accommodate the complex situations they are acting within. It is in this sense that such individuals are researchers, researching their everyday practice as they practice’. Drawing on the work of Stenhouse, Schon and Campbell et al, within this programme we sought to facilitate the development of reflective practice among the participants, allowing them to ‘(consciously) reflect’ on their ‘(subconscious) reflections’; this was at the heart of all our communications with the practitioners.

The RDOs, as researchers, feel that working on this programme has developed their own reflective practice as they have sought to develop this same skill among participants. That practitioners taking part in the programme valued the opportunity to think critically about their practice is clear from their feedback, although the extent to which reflective practice has been enhanced among participants will certainly vary. One small but positive exemplar provided by a practitioner is worth highlighting here; this individual flagged up
the value of being encouraged to think more critically as the most rewarding aspect of the programme - ‘... to think more critically about the kind of things people need. As always it is often the small things that make a difference and the things we miss or take for granted’.

Implications for further work in this field

In the introduction to their handbook, Davies, Hamilton and James put forward strong arguments in favour of developing and supporting practitioner research, especially within programmes such as the PLRI, in order to maximise the impact of research. As noted in Section 3, one practitioner on our programme, when asked what impact they thought their individual project might have on the wider field, reflected:

‘I don’t think one research report by a careers advisor is going to change government policy BUT if it becomes wider ... and practitioner research carries on... and people are contributing and it encourages other people to do similar things and then if everybody is saying the same thing ... at some point somebody has to listen to that and take it seriously if people are coming out with similar conclusions’

Involvement as RDOs in the development of the programme has deepened their commitment to and strengthened their belief in the value of practitioner engagement in research. Following on from the positive experience on this programme, we have developed a practitioner research study has been development in Rotherham, focusing on family book-sharing practices in the home and the impact of book-gifting schemes.

Conclusion

Has the research undertaken made a difference? At this stage the RDOs are confident that the research has had a considerable impact at the individual level, as documented in Part 3 of this report, and perhaps even for several of the practitioners at the organisational level. Whether impact will extend beyond the network could be debated, although disseminating the individual project write ups via the National Lifelong Learning Network Research Forum and the HEA website will provide a valuable opportunity to share the research findings with other practitioners working in this field. Furthermore, by producing the sections outlining the development of the programme and the RDOs reflections on this process, it is hoped that this report will prove useful in adding to the existing body of work such as the PLRI and LSIS publications.

Overall, it seems that this programme to support practitioner research has been successful in meeting what were quite ambitious initial expected outcomes. The programme has added value to the work of the two initiatives, providing a useful evaluative resource by giving voice to learner and practitioner experiences and impacting positively not only upon the practitioner researchers involved but also upon their practices and – potentially - their organisations.
References

Atkinson, Ian et al. (2009) Identifying the Success Factors, and Building Capacity, for Action Research in the Learning and Skills Sector. Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS)


Davies, Paul et al. (2007) Maximising the impact of practitioner research, A handbook of practical advice. London, National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC)


Hamilton, Mary et al. (2007) Practitioners leading research. London, National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy (NRDC)


Workshop 1: Investigative Project Planning Sheet

Name:
AH/HF or Both:
Job Title:
Organisation:

1. Research/evaluation focus - please give a brief description of area to be researched.

If you do not have clear ideas at this stage, take some time to reflect on the research and evaluation activities you may be already engaged in as part of your job. Are there any aspects which could be enhanced? Are there gaps?

2. Research/evaluation purpose - why are you doing it? Please give brief rationale and objectives.

Does the research/evaluation link to evidence already collected or previous research/evaluation activity? If yes please describe.

4. How will you find out what literature or data already exists in relation to your chosen research/evaluation focus?

5. Your initial research questions:

6. What possible research techniques/data collection methods might help you answer your research questions?
If you do want to develop a small investigative project over the next few months, it would be useful if you could consider the following before attending the next/further workshops.

7. Who will carry out the research?

8. Who else will the research involve (stakeholders)?

9. Who are the participants in the research? Initial thoughts on the sample?

10. How will you access participants?

11. What ethical issues do you need to consider?

12. Initial thoughts on research schedule i.e. how long project will take to complete, what will you do and when?
Aimhigher/Higher Futures Research and Evaluation Protocol

This document sets out how practitioners are expected to conduct their research/evaluation project and informs all those engaged in research or evaluation on behalf of Aimhigher South Yorkshire or Higher Futures. There are three sections:

Part A : Ethical framework. This is based on guiding principles developed by Aimhigher South Yorkshire (from those operated by Sheffield Hallam University) and has been adopted by Higher Futures.

Part B: A listing of several other useful, relevant research ethics guidelines.

Part C: A declaration agreement that practitioner researchers will be required to sign.

The term ‘practitioner researcher’ covers the following categories of staff that are being invited to conduct investigative and research activities. Each will require approval to carry out the work, as appropriate to their organisation.

Practitioner researchers within HE institutions
Practitioners will be required to seek approval for the work through their own institution's approval procedures for their investigative project (e.g. Research Ethics Committee).

Members of Aimhigher South Yorkshire/Higher Futures network staff based in colleges and schools
Practitioners will be required to have authorisation from the head teacher or principal or their delegated responsible senior member of staff for their investigative project.

Research/evaluation conducted by staff in other organisations
Practitioners will be required to seek approval for their investigative project through their own organisation from their line manager or responsible senior member of staff.

Part A - Ethical Framework

1. Legal requirements
   Research undertaken by staff and students must conform to all legal requirements. This will include
compliance with relevant data protection legislation, appropriate screening of researchers working with vulnerable groups and strict adherence to licensing requirements for any animal or biomedical research.

2. **Good practice standards**

Research should be undertaken in accordance with commonly agreed standards of good practice such as are laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki. These fundamental and widely accepted principles may broadly be categorised as:

- **Beneficence** – ‘do positive good’
- **Non-Malfeasance** – ‘do no harm’
- **Informed Consent**
- **Confidentiality/ Anonymity**

3. **Beneficence and Non-Malfeasance**

Terms such as risk, harm and hazards include emotional and mental distress, and possible damage to financial and social standing, as well as to physical harm.

- The research should be scientifically sound and the purpose should be to contribute to knowledge;
- The research should be undertaken and supervised by those who are appropriately qualified and experienced;
- The importance of the objective should be in proportion to the inherent risk to the participant. Concern for the interests of the participant must always prevail over the interests of science and society;
- The research should be preceded by careful assessment of predictable risks in comparison with foreseeable benefits to the participants or to others;
- Research should not be undertaken where the hazards involved are not believed to be predictable;
- Adequate facilities and procedures should be in place to deal with any potential hazards.

4. **Informed Consent**

- Each potential participant must be adequately informed of the aims, methods, anticipated benefits and potential hazards of the research and any discomfort it may entail;
- Any documentation given to potential participants should be comprehensible and there should be an opportunity for them to raise any issues of concern;
- Consent should be required in writing and records of consent should be maintained;
- Potential participants must be informed that they are free to withdraw consent to participation at any time;
- There should be a procedure for making complaints and participants should be made aware of this;
All participants should be volunteers. Considerable care should be taken where consent is sought from those in a dependent position and it should be made clear that refusal to participate will not lead to any adverse consequences. For example, students must be assured that any decision not to participate will not prejudice in any way their academic progress;

Any inducement offered to participants should be declared and should be in accordance with appropriate guidelines;

Consent must be obtained from a legal guardian in the case of minors or any others who do not have the legal competence to give informed consent.

5. Confidentiality/ Anonymity

All research should conform with legislation relating to data protection;

Details that would allow individuals to be identified should not be published, or made available, to anybody not involved in the research unless explicit consent is given by the individuals concerned, or such information is already in the public domain;

All reasonable steps should be taken to ensure that confidential details are secure;

Great care must be taken where there is an intention to use data collected for one study, for another study. It is important that relevant guidelines are followed.

(This guidance is only intended to be an introduction to the issues and an indication of the matters that will be considered by University ethics committees.)

6. Authority

The ultimate responsibility for the care of human participants rests with the researcher.

The researcher has the responsibility for deciding what authorisation, if any, should be sought. If researchers are in doubt as to what is appropriate they should seek advice. However, it is possible to give a general indication, as follows:

Self - Regulation. There are a number of straightforward procedures where it may not be necessary for researchers to seek ethics committee approval. However, in these cases the researcher still has a responsibility to consider ethical issues and take note of any relevant codes of practice. Procedures which may come under this category include:

Questionnaires and interview schedules where there are no major issues relating to confidentiality or sensitive information or controversial subject matter;

Research already granted permission by other ethics committees;

Procedures authorised by delegated committees as being appropriate for self –regulation.

However, where there is any doubt about any ethical issues relating to the project, it should be referred to the most appropriate delegated committee. Also researchers should seek advice from more experienced colleagues, within or outside the University.
It is important to note that consideration by an ethics committee does not replace other procedures and advice relating to insurance cover, contract authorisation and health and safety issues.

Part B - Links to useful ethics guidance documents

http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/pdfs/ETHICAL.pdf

Economic and Social Research Council: Research Ethics Framework (updated from 2005 framework)
http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/ESRC_Re_Ethics_Frame_tcm6-11291.pdf

British Sociological Association: Statement of Ethical Practice (March 2002)
http://www.britsoc.co.uk/user_doc/Statement%20of%20Ethical%20Practice.pdf

British Psychological Society: Code of Ethics and Conduct (March 2006)

Part C - The Signed Declaration

a) Title of investigative project:

b) Name of practitioner researcher:

c) Please sign one of the following as appropriate:

I am a practitioner researcher within an HE institution
I confirm my responsibility to deliver the research project in accordance with the Aimhigher South Yorkshire Guiding Principles set out above.
I will seek approval for my investigative project through my own institution's Research Ethics Committee procedures.

Signature of practitioner researcher: _________________________________
Date: _______________________________
I am a practitioner researcher within the Aimhigher South Yorkshire/Higher Futures network

I confirm my responsibility to deliver the research project in accordance with the Aimhigher South Yorkshire Guiding Principles set out above.

I will seek authorisation from the head teacher or principal or my delegated responsible senior member of staff for my investigative project.

Signature of practitioner researcher: ...........................................
Date: ......................................

I am a practitioner researcher (not employed by school, college or HEI)

I confirm my responsibility to deliver the research project in accordance with the Aimhigher South Yorkshire Guiding Principles set out above.

I will seek approval for my investigative project through my own organisation from my line manager or responsible senior member of staff.

Signature of practitioner researcher: ...........................................
Date: ......................................

Signature of University of Sheffield Research Development Officer:

.........................................................  Date: ..............................

Signature of Aimhigher/Higher Futures Director

.........................................................  Date: ..............................