

Blurring the Boundaries:

A Report on the NALN Preparation for HE Course

by Emily Candela



I am very pleased to introduce the report *Blurring the Boundaries: A Report on the NALN Preparation for HE Course* by Emily Candela, commissioned by the National Arts Learning Network (NALN).

NALN is a national Lifelong Learning Network comprising specialist arts institutions, working together to widen participation in higher education and to ensure a more diverse workforce for the Creative and Cultural Industries.

In commissioning and disseminating this report NALN aims to take forward its work on widening participation. The report analyses the NALN Preparation for HE course pilots at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design and Hereford College of Arts.

The report shows the strength and effectiveness of the course and its potential transferability to other institutions. As one of the students on the course commented:

'It's a big step from ND to doing the BA, and to have [the Prep] course in the middle shows you what's to be expected. It helps a lot.' (Eliza, HCA)

I would like to thank the author Emily Candela for her work in researching and writing the report and also Janey Hagger (Central Saint Martins) and Helen Vine (Hereford College of Arts) for their work in devising, piloting and organising the Preparation for HE courses which have proved so successful.

Mark Crawley
Director of the National Arts Learning Network
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1. Introduction

In Spring 2009 the National Art Learning Network (NALN) commissioned Emily Candela to report on its Preparation for Higher Education ('Prep for HE'¹) Further to Higher Education bridging course, which has been running at two NALN institutions as part of their progression activities.² It has operated at Central Saint Martins (CSM), which is part of University of the Arts London (UAL), since its pilot there in 2005. In 2007, the course was adopted at Hereford College of Arts (HCA), and modelled on the version at CSM. At both institutions, the course is at least partly funded by NALN³, and run by the NALN Progression Manager at each college: Janey Hagger at CSM and Helen Vine at HCA.

¹ At HCA the course is named 'The Art of Transition: FE to HE Bridging', but for the sake of consistency, in this report I will refer to the course as 'Prep for HE' as it is generally called by NALN.

² This research began in April 2009 and ran through August of the same year.

³ At HCA, the course is funded completely by NALN. At CSM, the course is funded in part by NALN and in part by core Widening Participation funding allocated under UAL's Access Agreement.

After a brief introduction to NALN and the context of the course, I will discuss the findings of this research, which covers successful aspects and challenges of the course's curriculum, pedagogy and transferability. I conclude with a discussion of sustainability and recommendations for the future running of the Prep course. A comparison of the course at the two institutions carries on throughout.

1.1 Aims of this report

1. To identify aspects of curriculum and pedagogy of the Prep for HE bridging course that address barriers (identified by previous research) that non-traditional students face in applying, progressing and making the transition to HE.
2. To assess the transferability of the course based on a comparison of the institutional contexts of HCA and CSM.
3. To touch on possible models of sustainability and recommendations for future improvement.

1.2 Context

NALN is a Lifelong Learning Network comprising specialist art, design and performing arts institutions, with an aim to widen participation in Higher Education (HE), particularly for vocational learners. The Prep for HE course discussed in this report contributes to NALN's aim to develop methods of bridging between Further Education (FE) and HE. It offers progression opportunities for vocational learners by preparing students in their second year of a BTEC National Diploma (a two-year course) to apply, progress and make a successful transition to HE.

The course corresponds to a nation-wide aim to widen participation⁴ in Higher Arts Education (HAE) by increasing the participation of non-traditional students⁵. The relatively low numbers of students entering HAE from lower socio-economic groups is well-documented (HEFCE, 2008; Hudson, 2006), and fine art specifically is significantly less diverse than other areas of study in the arts. For example, 2004 data for UAL shows that 'within the same university, the School of Fine Art had half the proportion of non-white students, half the proportion of students from poorer

⁴ See Appendix 1 for information on Widening Participation

⁵ The students on the Prep for HE course are considered to be 'non-traditional' students because they fit widening participation criteria and come from an FE background.

backgrounds, and a quarter of the proportion of students with vocational qualifications from Further Education (FE) colleges, in comparison with the School of Fashion Design Technology' (Hudson, 2005: 8-9). Most accepted applicants to HAE courses come in through the 'traditional' route: A levels followed by a Foundation Diploma in Art and Design (Hudson, 2009: 10). Students on FE courses such as the BTEC National Diploma, from which the Prep for HE course draws, tend to come from lower income families (UAL, 2004). However, Creative Art and Design is the *most popular* subject area for those qualifying ND students going on to full-time HE (HEFCE, 2007), which confirms the urgency of examining FE to HE bridging in art and design.

This report follows a study undertaken by Hagger and Scopa (2007) on the transition of the first eight students to progress to UAL degree programmes from CSM's pilot Prep for HE course in 2005. *The Art of Smooth Transition* identified challenges experienced by the students in the areas of social integration, financial worries and take-up of support, and noted the course's benefits particularly in terms of student confidence. For a summary of further research on bridging programmes and the barriers to HE progression for non-traditional and vocational learners, see Appendices 2 and 3.

1.3 Methodology

This report represents a snapshot of the Prep for HE course across CSM and HCA based on an analysis of baseline data on the institutions and their students, available progression statistics, course documents and previous reports, as well as qualitative data gathered through confidential, semi-structured interviews with staff at each college and focus groups with students which ran from April to July 2009. Focus groups were self-selecting and included students from a range of years of the course at each institution⁶. This research was undertaken in accordance with UAL's Code of Practice on Research Ethics⁷. Qualitative data analysis was done using NVivo software, which allows the researcher to analyse the frequency or density of themes emerging from the data.

⁶ See Appendices 4-6 for sample data and interview schedules.

⁷ Written consent was obtained from all interviewees and they were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. More information is available here: http://www.arts.ac.uk/docs/Code_of_Practice_on_Research_Ethics.pdf.

1.4 Limits of the Research

Given the scope and aims of this research, the statistical data reported derive from analysis of statistics available from the institutions involved. Analysis of statistics in some areas was limited by gaps in the available data on the specific subset of students (those NALN students who completed the Prep for HE course in the Fine Art subject area) with which this research is concerned.

2. Background on the course and institutions

This section provides background information on the Prep course, and begins a comparison of the course as it exists at CSM and HCA.

2.1 Course Structure

The basic course structure is similar at both institutions. It consists of two units:

- 1) an intensive **week-long programme** of largely studio work that takes place in HE workshop spaces and focuses on drawing, printmaking and painting as well as research and art-college-specific literacy skills⁸. At CSM it is called the 'summer school' and occurs at the end of the students' first year of the ND course. At HCA it falls in October, at the start of the students' second year on the ND.⁹
- 2) **weekly half-day sessions** throughout the Autumn (8-10 sessions) and Spring (about 6 sessions) of the following academic year that prepare students for application interviews and eventual progression to HE. They are not practice-based, but seek to guide the students in articulating and contextualising their ideas. By December, students are expected to have decided on a subject area so that they can build their portfolios with a specific degree course in mind during the Spring sessions. At both institutions, mock interviews/advice sessions take place in the Spring with admissions staff.

At CSM there is also a pre-entry writing workshop at the end of the summer before stage 1 entry for those offered a place on a degree course. CSM also offers a pre-

⁸ This report focuses less on the studio component of the course and more on the literacy component because it emerged more strongly in the data.

⁹ In 2007/08 the week was scheduled during the holidays, but staff found that the student response was better the next year when it ran during term time, coinciding with a week of the ND.

entry advice day in the Spring. HCA runs pre-entry advisory interviews for all of its ND students.

At CSM and HCA the course aims to:

- **support the students' application to HE** through developing their portfolio and interview skills, providing guidance in the decision-making process and, upon completion of the course, **offering students an interview** for a degree course at the institution as part of progression agreements at both colleges.
- **familiarise students with the HE culture and environment** (and those features particular to art college), and offer advice on progressing (including financial issues) so as to promote **confidence** in applying and ease the transition from FE to HE.
- address the **literacy demands** of art college
- encourage **self directed learning**

2.2 Central Saint Martins College

CSM is one of six colleges that make up University of the Arts London and comprises five schools across a range of sites. As a whole, UAL boasts over 20,600 students. Based in central London, CSM has a strong international reputation and draws students from over 90 countries (CSM, 2008). About one third of UAL students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. At CSM in particular, the proportion of those students from lower socio-economic classes is slightly lower, but has registered a small increase in recent years, from 21.6% in 2006/07 to 26.3% in 2008/09 (UAL, 2008).

The Prep for HE course at CSM, first piloted in 2005/06, was developed and is currently led by Progression Manager Janey Hagger. In its first years, the course ran at Byam Shaw School of Art in North London, a more recent addition to CSM (2003), which supported its early development. Now the course runs across CSM sites.

CSM's Prep course intake began with 21 students in 2005 and has grown significantly each year: in 2008/09, 75 students enrolled for the summer school and 98 for the autumn sessions (typically more student join in the Autumn at CSM). For

this reason, after the pilot year, students were split up according to subject area¹⁰. This report will focus primarily on the Fine Art subject area¹¹.

2.3 Hereford College of Arts

HCA is located in the county of Herefordshire, which has the third lowest population density in England. In contrast to CSM's urban locale, HCA draws from a rural community. Herefordshire is within the top 10% of England's most deprived areas and maintains below average 'participation in learning' (Vine, 2007: 1-2).

HCA is a dual sector institution, offering BTEC, Foundation Diploma and Access Portfolio courses. In contrast to CSM's long history of HE, HCA's HE provision is more recently established (comprising 15 full honours and Foundation Degree courses). Its student population is significantly smaller than CSM's, and more than half are enrolled in FE courses, with 575 full-time FE students, 325 full-time HE students and 100 part-time students.

The Prep course has run twice at HCA at the time of writing: in 2007/08 and 2008/09. The intake is small, with 8 students the first year and 10 the second year. Additional students do not join in after the summer school and they are not split up by subject area as they are at CSM. In 2007/08 the focus of the course at HCA was specifically fine art; now it is *broadly* fine art-centred so that students can interview for any of the arts degrees at the college.

2.4 Recruitment

The colleges' differing recruitment strategies for the Prep course reflect their contrasting contexts; one, an oversubscribed institution with large international draw, and the other, a younger regional dual-sector institution with strong FE provision. At both institutions, however, students selected for the course must fit widening participation criteria.

¹⁰ This varied from year to year, and students were split into more subject areas as the intake increased. Over the years, these groups have included: Fine Art (this includes students progressing to BAFA, Fda, BA Ceramics and BA Design for Performance and, until 2009/10, Graphics), Textile Design, Fashion Design, Architecture, and Graphics. Each course takes place in its relevant department at any one of CSM's sites.

¹¹ This research focuses on the Fine Art subject area because a) it most closely compares with the course at HCA which does not split up its cohort and focused on fine art in its first year, and then more broadly in its second year, and, b) for the particular widening participation challenges pertaining to fine art courses noted in section 1.2.

The CSM course recruits ND students from 15 partner FE colleges in London with widening participation post codes. Students must fit at least two widening participation criteria, the key one being income level. Selection is primarily done by ND tutors who are asked by Janey Hagger, CSM's Progression Manager to suggest three or four students per subject area. She visits the colleges once a year and meets with the selected students. Often, lured by the opportunity to participate on a course at a 'big-name' university, entire year groups from the FE colleges want to join. However, only very motivated and 'fairly high achieving' students are ultimately selected as they will be expected to work at a high level.

HCA's Prep students are selected by the ND tutor and lead Prep course tutor together, and almost all come from the ND at HCA. Two came from other FE colleges in the region the first year but met difficulties as they had to use public transport to come a long way, which proved to be logistically and financially difficult. Selection criteria is also different at HCA. There, students are primarily chosen because they are able, but possibly *undecided* students who would most benefit from encouragement and advice on progression. HCA's ND tutor says they look for 'students who lack confidence', but also those who will be able to 'lift the others' not only on the Prep course, but also on the ND. As the lead Prep course tutor explains, 'We are here to say if you haven't thought about it, or if you're *umm-ing* and *ahh-ing*, our aim is to get you to apply'.

As a result of the different recruitment styles and institutional contexts described above, the student cohorts at each college diverge. Firstly, coming from several different FE colleges, the CSM students tend to vary more in their previous educational experience. Additionally they represent a diverse group in terms of ethnicity; in 2008/09 80% of students in the Fine Art subject area identified themselves as 'Black', 'Mixed' or 'Other', with 20% identifying themselves as 'White British'. On the other hand, the HCA students are a more homogenous group, as all are White British, and when they begin their Prep course, they are already quite familiar with one another from the ND. There are some similarities between the cohorts, however. At both institutions, several students come in with dyslexia, which is not uncommon in art college, and many are first in their family to study at HE level (44% over both years at HCA and 60% of students over the last 2 years of the CSM course).

2.5 Progression

2.5.1 Statistical Data

This section focuses primarily upon the most recent two years of the course.

HCA

Of the 18 students who participated in the Prep for HE course at HCA over 2007/08 and 2008/09, 100% completed the programme, applied to HE and were offered places on BA courses. HCA's Prep students apply to a range of arts degree courses and in the past have progressed in illustration, costume design, graphics, contemporary and applied arts and fine art. Two students progressed internally from the first year of the course (2007/08). This increased to five students from the 2008/09 cohort, but at the time of writing, students from this year have not yet progressed to their degree courses. Because most have progressed outside the college so far, there is little data on stage 1 retention of Prep students from HCA.

CSM

In 2007/08, 28 students participated in the Fine Art subject area of the Prep course at CSM. Eight applied and were offered places in BA Fine Art or FdA at CSM. Therefore, even though just under 30% of the original cohort remained on the course through to application stage, 100% of those who did progressed. In 2008/09, the Fine Art intake jumped to 60 students. 27% of these students applied to HE and 69% of those who applied were offered places. Progression *rates* at CSM are not as high as those at HCA, but its intake most years is much higher than that of HCA. Additionally, the majority of those who remain on the course up to application stage tend to progress, indicating that it makes a substantial contribution to increasing the participation of non-traditional students in HAE. Nevertheless, the disparity between the numbers of students joining the course and those who see it through to the application stage are notable and might be a subject for future research. It is not possible to speculate on the topic here, because students who left the course were not interviewed; the focus of this research is on the significant group of students who did progress, and how the course benefited them.

Most CSM Prep course students who progress do so internally to degree courses, although some progress to Foundation Degrees at the college. CSM's lead Prep course tutor says this decision is made with the student: 'They start to vocalise what

they want [...] You don't want to push someone onto something just because of the numbers if they're not ready'.

The Art of Smooth Transition focusses on the eight students who progressed from CSM's pilot in October 2006 and reports that two deferred for 'financial and domestic' reasons and one withdrew. Two more students were placed on retrieval after the first summative assessment that year (Hagger and Scopa, 2007: 3-4). Several changes have been made since the pilot, especially in the area of student support at degree level (discussed later), and we can see that overall retention rates among NALN students studying BA Fine Art at CSM have been high over 2007/08 and 2008/09: within the BA at CSM's School of Fine Art site (located in London's West End), retention of NALN students was at 76% in 2006/07, but at 100% for the two subsequent academic years. Byam Shaw's BA Fine Art retention rate for NALN students has been similarly high (UAL, 2009). Prep course students' experiences of transition to HE is discussed later.

2.5.2 Qualitative Data

In interviews staff spoke more about potential barriers to progression than did the students, but readers must bear in mind that the students' focus groups were not as intimate as the one-to-one interviews conducted with staff. At both institutions staff commented that most of the Prep students would not have considered HE prior to taking the course. HCA's ND tutor observed that many of her FE students, 'particularly the bridging type students, would - maybe because of their family background - would not feel confident to make an application [to HE]. Sometimes they can't find the £15 to put the UCAS together'.

A few students in the sample spoke of financial barriers or a lack of support. One student's mother 'wasn't at all' enthusiastic about the idea of him going to university, and was 'fretting about money'. Another student had felt discouraged from applying to HE by early school experiences:

I have dyslexia quite severe and I'd always been told I wouldn't do well in learning, I was told when I was in primary school that I wouldn't go into secondary school and my parents should put me in a school for people with learning difficulties [. . .] When I got the chance to do [Prep for HE] I started thinking about going to uni. I started thinking, yeah, I could actually do it. I'm quite happy where I am. (Mary, CSM)

Some students had previously considered HE application, but were unsure:

I didn't think about doing my BA until just before the bridging course, that's why I went on the bridging course. To make my final decision. (Eliza, HCA)

I think I was a bit unsure whether or not to go on. I was undecided about whether to go to university or not. It was all about the fees thing, the money. But I have definitely decided now I want to move away... (Andy, HCA)

Even for those students who were considering HE prior to taking the Prep course, it provided the decisive push and support necessary to urge them forward.



3. Findings

This section outlines findings of the research concerning aspects of curriculum and pedagogy of the course that address the barriers (identified by previous research) non-traditional students face in applying and progressing to HE, as well as the challenges of the course, its transferability and plans for its sustainability.

3.1 Curriculum and Pedagogy: Strengths

This section discusses how the course addresses the language and culture of HE. It is divided into sections on literacy, familiarity with HE, support, tutors, students strengths, and challenges.

3.1.1. Literacy

...it's about being able to talk about your work. (HCA Tutor)

After the week-long programme, the Prep for HE course focuses on the articulation of ideas, analytical skills and the language of art. This literacy component of the course was emphasised by students and tutors at both institutions as its greatest strength, and frequently, one of its greatest challenges¹².

Literacy skills pose a challenge for first-year students in many disciplines (Hudson, 2009). In art and design, they are crucial not only for a successful interview, but to a student's ability to thrive at HE level. The discourse of art has its own lexicon, sometimes criticised as jargon-esque and indecipherable. Nevertheless, 'art language' persists, and does so with particular vigour in art college. As one staff member noted, if students do not appear conversant in this language, they might be seen 'as vulnerable or in deficit of either creativity or intelligence' by admissions teams. Tutors at both institutions were aware that literacy skills posed a potential barrier, something which was also noted in the 2007 report on the course (Hagger and Scopa, 2007). Students interviewed for this research confirmed this: 'actually we did not learn much art vocabulary before we went to [the Prep course]' (Mary, CSM). Furthermore, some of the students at CSM do not speak English as a first language, so to take on the vocabulary of art can be, to say the least, 'scary', as one student put it. A significant number of students on the Prep course are dyslexic, which can also complicate some of the literacy demands of HE.

Elements of the course mentioned by students and staff as developing literacy skills were: presentations, crits, researching artists, visual diaries/reflective journals, exhibition visits, and, at CSM, a pre-entry writing workshop. In all of these areas,

¹² I will discuss HAE 'literacies' here as they are defined in Hudson (2009) as 'the language, speaking and listening, reading and writing demands' of the discipline (107). This includes group critiques ('crits'), tutorials and research (such as exhibition visits); basically any context in which the student must articulate ideas relating to her/his work or the wider context of contemporary art.

students were encouraged to make **personal connections** with their own art and research:

It wasn't really about the artwork. It was about you and how important you thought your work was. It wasn't about amazing looking things, it was about what you had to say about [them] and I think that's different to the BTEC. (Robin, CSM)

In general, many students indicated that the ND alone would not have prepared them for such a high level of literacy. Nevertheless, some said that research and theory still posed a challenge at degree level. CSM's lead Prep tutor remarked that it is a challenge to teach these skills on the course, due primarily to 'the difference within the classroom'. This is a feature of FE groups, as previous educational experiences vary among the students (Bathmaker, 2006; Hayward et al., 2008)¹³. Nevertheless this tutor holds that the solution is *not* to compromise the 'the quality of the discourse'. At its heart, this shows respect for the students, and it seems to have paid off, overall, in their development of a sophisticated approach to art and design.



Spoken articulation

Oral presentations are key to the teaching of literacy on the Prep course. At CSM in the second weekly autumn meeting, students give ten-minute presentations on a subject outside of art that is personal to them. Their tutor vividly describes this session:

...a unicycle, an industrial metal track, a passionate talk about cooking from a female Muslim student [...] We had a good discussion and everyone joined in.

¹³ This was not expressed as an issue at HCA where the students are drawn from the same ND course and do not vary as much demographically.

The tutors then rephrase the students' presentations using critical language, writing a list of words as they go, which generates discussion. Students record the words in journals and are encouraged to note any of their own ideas as well. The intent is that students will take this experience of speaking on subjects close to them and 'extend the confidence and ownership that surrounds those activities to [their] engagement with art' (Harley, 2008).

This idea is also applied (more informally) at HCA. Early in the week-long programme, students research artists relevant to their own practice and group discussions concerning the language of ideas begin. The students' own work is discussed regularly:

They can make the connections all the time between what they're doing here and in rest of their lives. [...] They start to talk about what's important to them. All the time they're getting used to that way of learning to talk about what's important and make work relevant to what's important and who you are. (HCA tutor)

One student highlighted this as the most valuable aspect of the course:

The fact that [the tutor] kept on the fact that work has to be really personal. You had to research and find out about things that mean most to you. No matter what project you're on at the moment it has to be something you're really interested in. (Clarissa, HCA)

She followed by saying, 'that's something that most of us kept on at,' indicating that this practice really *stuck* beyond the scope of the Prep course. Making these kinds of connections not only helps students gain a sense of ownership over their research process, but introduces them to a sophisticated understanding of contemporary art. CSM's tutor notes, 'a great deal of art practice is concerned with social relationships' and the world *outside* of art (Harley, 2008). It also familiarises students with the independent thinking that is expected in HE, fostering the development of students' individual artistic identities. Clarissa pointed out that by the end of the course, 'me and Emma [a fellow student] felt more like proper artists'. And Matt said that during the course, 'I figured out more my direction, who I was more,' which aided his decision-making process regarding which BA course to apply to.



Crits are introduced during the week-long programme. The programme at HCA in particular follows a pattern of studio work each day followed by a crit, with a final group crit on the last day. Students' previous experience with crits varied. For one CSM student it was a new encounter: 'with my college, we never did anything like talking about your work and why you're working like that' (Sam, CSM). HCA students, on the other hand, confirmed that they had already experienced crits on their ND course, although they took place in smaller groups and more frequently on the Prep course. Eliza described how the crit during the Prep provided focus for her: 'It was good to have the crit to keep me going in the right direction and I was hitting all the targets I needed to'.

The weekly sessions' **portfolio and interview preparation** also incorporates literacy skills. At HCA, each session involves practice in talking about one's artwork through regular group tutorials where students reflect on the development of their practice, ideas and portfolio. Their ND tutor sees a benefit in this gradual process of interview preparation: 'with 10 weeks, you [can] say, last time you talked about this, what would you say now we talked about it again?' And a Prep course tutor commented that the small size generates an atmosphere in which students feel they can practice talking about their ideas: '[Because the ND is so big], if you're a little bit shy, you

won't have been in an environment where you have been forced to do it or felt comfortable'.

Students see admissions teams (the heads of the BA courses at their institution) in the spring term for a mock interview (sometimes called 'portfolio review' or 'interview advice session' to ease nerves). These are 'quite tough' according to one CSM staff member, and as a student observed, 'They were really honest if it looked as though you didn't have enough work or you didn't have enough to say about your work' (Rachel, CSM).

At CSM, the students discuss the portfolio advice they received in the next session, outlining an 'action plan' in their journals. The bulk of actual portfolio-building work happens outside of the course, as it continues to concentrate on concepts and language; their tutor explains, 'We don't have a practical workshop scenario. We talk to them about what they can do'. She notes, however, that portfolio-building is impacted by the literacy focus of the course, in that students begin to go beyond 'brief-led' projects. This becomes clear as they present new work and ideas to the group in the following sessions:

It's almost like then all the thinking and the talking and the contextual studies comes out and they produce something experimental. It's at that point that they have to make something different and really thrash over what those new pieces of work are and they bring them in.

Indeed, students expressed an increased sense of confidence in the possibilities of their studio practice:

I was kind of too scared to do anything off of [paper]. Now I'm doing more things not using paper. (Kara, CSM)

...coming here and seeing other people talking about their work and why they're working, and other people talking about your work, it just helps you think differently in how to work. (Sam, CSM)



You can take it as far as you want. No boundaries. (Matt, HCA)

Ultimately this has an impact on their interviews:

They make new things that they are incredibly well-able to speak about in the interview. One of the interview questions is 'show me something new you've done recently'. We let the students know that's the cue for the students to talk about what they want to talk about. They're in charge. (CSM tutor)

Students noticed their **confidence** increase due to the interview preparation:

I think if I had not taken part in the exercises here, I would have been really nervous. Just getting into the building alone makes you nervous. (Sam, CSM)

They prepare you for all the techniques [...] you do the pre-interview and then when you go to do the real interview you're more confident to talk about your work. You know how to present yourself. They teach you how to present yourself in the interview. (Kara, CSM)

I felt really prepared for the interview after the course, and some people had chosen not to go on the workshops on my ND and they were all worrying, and they didn't have – every Wednesday you were told, 'this is what they like' so I was really prepared, and the others on my course didn't have that [...] I think without the workshops, we would have felt so ill-prepared for the interview. (Robin, CSM)

Talking about your work is pretty easy. (Matt, HCA)

Although students indicated that they felt better prepared than they would have without the Prep course, some challenges - and nervousness - remained. Matt, quoted above, went on to say, 'when it came to the questions I just felt stuck [...] I was wracking my head'.

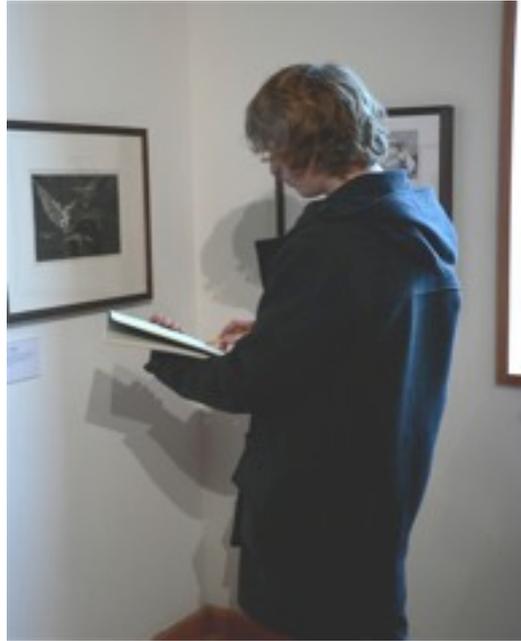
Frequent discussions and presentations had a **social impact** on the group. For many, it was the first time they heard other students express themselves in this way. A couple of students from HCA, where the majority come from the same ND cohort, commented on a classmate who opened up when it came to talking about his work during the Prep course:

I never heard him talking before. I thought he was so shy that he wouldn't talk. When he's talking about art he goes on and on.

For Eliza, this helped her to develop her own ideas 'because you hear everybody else's ideas on art. You don't really realise what other people think'. The sense of community that had developed among students at both institutions was evident in their ease with each other during the focus groups for this research. At HCA in particular, they frequently answered my questions for one another: 'I think Debbie, she got so like she's really confident from this course. I think she's gained the most from this course. Probably Debbie and Kate' (Clarissa, HCA).

Research

Researching other artists and subjects relevant to one's artwork is integral to the course and students are encouraged to '[identify] those areas that could be used as a cultural reference, not only including contemporary practice, but also practice that may lie outside the gallery circuit' (Hagger, 2007a). This offers students a broadened view of art and design in line with an HE understanding of the subject. For one CSM student, the course illuminated 'how much more I needed to know'. And Eliza (HCA) said, 'It helped me not to be so narrow-minded about everything. It puts it in a broader context'.



At both colleges, students are introduced early on to the **visual diary** (also called a 'reflective journal' at CSM), a sketchbook that includes notes on ideas and research. These are used to foster independent thinking and research and serve as a crucial platform for evidencing work. At CSM, it's integral to the first session of the weekly meetings when students learn methods of identifying exhibitions using *Time Out*. Each student chooses an exhibition to visit on their own, and conducts some research around it in the library, taking notes in their journal. Several weeks later they give a 10 minute presentation on their visit to the rest of the group, followed by a group discussion of all the presentations. There is also a group trip to the Tate Britain in which the students attend a guided tour and are expected to make notes in their journals throughout.

Visiting **exhibitions** is a form of artistic research vital to contextualising one's practice critically and historically. The exhibition element of the course is a point of contrast between the two institutions for the simple reason that HCA's rural location means attending exhibitions is far more complicated. At CSM, students are expected to visit exhibitions independently, increasing their 'feelings of entitlement to London's rich art resources' (Harley, 2008). At HCA, one full day of the week-long programme is devoted to visiting a gallery. The journey is preparation and cost intensive for the course, but noted as a valuable experience:

I found it interesting. When I went to galleries before I'd walk around and just look at them. But then I went with the bridging course you took time to look through. (Eliza, HCA)



As part of an introduction to critical evaluative skills, students choose three objects/ images/concepts that interest them in the gallery to draw in their journals. Because the students attend together, it provides an opportunity for group discussion in the gallery and in the session at HCA the next day when the students present their personal responses.

The writing workshops at CSM

Spoken rather than written articulation is emphasised throughout much of the course, but at CSM there is a writing workshop for students who have been offered a place. It runs just before the beginning of the students' first term of their degree. The first session involves a collaborative exercise in critical writing, after which the students write a mini-essay on their own that they bring back for a final session. One student said that although she had written essays before, 'It was different because it was at a higher level of analysis' (Tamiko, CSM), and Robin cited the writing workshop in particular as preparing her for the transition to HE.

3.1.2. Familiarity with HE

It's a big step from ND to doing the BA, and to have [the Prep] course in the middle shows you what's to be expected. It helps a lot. (Eliza, HCA)

A key issue flagged in *The Art of Smooth Transition* was students' adjustment to the HE culture and environment (Hagger and Scopa, 2007). Many Prep students are the first in their family to attend HE, so they might not be as privy to its culture and system as the 'traditional' HE student might be. Many elements of the Prep course's curriculum and pedagogy listed in the previous section prepare students for the

demands and teaching methods of HE. This section covers additional aspects of the course that provide students with the cultural capital necessary for navigating the terrain of HAE.



Environment

The entire CSM course takes place at the same site as the college's HE courses. A benefit of this is that the cohort see work of BA students immediately because the summer school begins with a tour of the degree shows. But it was the opportunity to become familiar with the **physical building** itself that students saw as a particular advantage when they progressed:

I knew where I am going to be if I got a place. [...] where the student financial is, where the student union is, where you can find jobs [...] I think we are more ahead than everyone else over here because we don't even have to ask where the place is.
(Kara, CSM)

Recent research suggests that even in dual sector institutions (like HCA), splits persist between FE and HE cultures (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). At HCA, FE and HE are located at different sites, so ND students are not likely to be familiar with the college's HE Centre. While the weekly sessions are in the same building as the ND, the week-long programme takes place at the HE Centre in October when the Prep students can work alongside BA students; 'they're away, they feel like it's an adventure. It's a different building, environment, and they also see bits of work the grown-up students do' (HCA ND tutor). Additionally, the group visits third-year fine art studios. This also provides the college with an opportunity to recruit for its relatively

new HE courses. Indeed, more students are progressing internally from the most recent run than from the first year of the course.

Both courses involve **HE staff**, to varying degrees, in order to expose students to HE teaching styles. Moreover, on a day-to-day level, once students progress, it helps to see a familiar face. One student felt prepared for the BA because 'you got to meet the course tutors, and they kind of knew us as well'.

CSM's Prep course tutors also teach across the BA Fine Art, and while the HCA course tutors do not teach in HE, the students hear presentations from HCA degree course tutors, who are also invited to the final exhibition of student work that closes the week-long programme. Additionally, mock interviews at both institutions are with internal HE staff, which, a tutor commented, 'feels like they're getting someone they don't know but it's not so scary because they're not getting someone from outside'.

The CSM course employs **student ambassadors**, current degree course students who are there to 'help the new students feel comfortable'. They are recommended by course directors and are usually NALN students themselves. The Prep tutor explains, 'They might share their experience [...] there's the hope that they speak the language of the students. They've got the experience that they've been through already'. A form of peer-learning, the student ambassadors help the Prep students conduct research, photocopying relevant images for them in the library and giving input as the students paint during the summer school.

Advice on the practical considerations of progression (particularly financial worries, a well-established barrier) helped students prepare for the transition to HE. CSM runs an advice day in May which provides students with crucial information on their student loan and available support, and introduces them to student life. Students from the pilot year reported that the advice they received about funding was 'invaluable' (Hagger and Scopa, 2007: 10). Some HCA students spoke of more informal help. When asked whether he sought financial advice, Andy remarked, 'You can go and talk to [the tutors] about anything. They're bound to know the answers'. Another student mentioned weekly advice sessions:

We did little one-on-one tutorials. We did them at least once a week. I'd ask them about the money side of things. I'm not particularly from the most wealthy family in the world. It was one of my biggest worries. (Eliza, HCA)

Self direction

Independent research is discussed in the Literacy section as contributing to HE level working skills. An additional skill, identified in *The Art of Smooth Transition* that the students may struggle with is **time management**, especially as many lead complicated lives outside of college. The course demands that they juggle the dual demands of their ND and the Prep course. A CSM tutor notes that this means, particularly as interviews approach in the Spring, that students must make more 'adult decisions' regarding time management:

We talk about time management and stuff like that so they don't panic, so they can spend some time on their portfolio at home. A lot of them have jobs. A lot of them work in their parents' businesses [...] They're expected to pull their weight. Often there's no let up.

Tutors spoke of striking a balance between nurturing students on a very individual level, and preparing them to be independent. A CSM tutor comments that while the course is intended to be less brief-led than the ND, 'we do really support them and keep on their case'.

At HCA the group is very small, allowing for much individual attention and a strong informal structure of **support**. The tutors also monitor the students, again, on an informal level, as the ND and lead Prep course tutor are in frequent communication and often discuss individual students:

We try to look at each student...see where they're finding it too difficult. Get to them. Poke them a little bit [...] when you see that they're flagging, you give them a little individual tutorial, or if they're not understanding something, when you've got a small group of about 10, you can come back again and again. (HCA Tutor)

Support at CSM is discussed in the next section as it is a major component of the NALN students' on-course experience.



Making the Transition

Several students interviewed for this research had completed the Prep course in previous years and were now at some point in their degree. For some, the transition was not much of a shock, as a result of their Prep course experience:

I think that's because I did the bridging and I was informed, and talked to some people who were like, oh I didn't know we had to do this much research or draw in this way. (Eliza, HCA)

It helped me show how I should work in college. You have to do some extra. (Mary, CSM)

Whereas at HCA informal support is a strength, CSM's more formal structure of NALN student support at degree level has become key to improving the on-course performance of these students. Hagger and Scopa (2007) noted that students' use of available support was 'erratic' when the course was in its early stages (9). They recommended 'more active student support for dyslexia' and a 'closer tracking of student progress' (12). These recommendations have resulted in positive developments, which speak to the reflexive character of the course. Progression Manager Janey Hagger describes the monitoring that takes place:

We have tutors on course looking out for them. Being able to monitor if there is a crisis happening because a lot of the students – they don't ask for help.

Additionally, the introduction of a NALN learning support tutor has made an enormous impact over just two years: 'At the end of [2007/08], over 60% of the stage 1 NALN cohort were [at risk]. In June 2009, the figure is 39.6%' (Fahy, 2009). Several students interviewed remarked enthusiastically that the NALN support tutor was very helpful and easy to access. One student noted that the support provided her with a deeper knowledge of her dyslexia and exactly what kind of challenges may arise on the degree course so that they would not come as a bitter surprise: 'He made us understand why we're dyslexic [...] was kind of telling me what you're going to expect, how many essays you get, so I knew already how much essay and how long the dissertation's going to take'. The lead Prep tutor described the learning support tutor as 'brilliant' and mentioned a 'BA FA second year student who goes and speaks to [the support tutor] practically every week'.



3.1.3. Tutors

This report would be incomplete without mention of the students' emphasis on the beneficial impact of their tutors on their experience of the Prep course. Individual attention from tutors was highlighted by Clarissa as building her **confidence**:

It's good to have someone who's really really positive about your work. That doesn't often happen. [...] It gives you confidence. Having two teachers watching whilst you're drawing and just like because it's such a small group you get so much more support.

Some mentioned the role of the tutors in easing the daunting experience of coming to CSM for the Prep course:

...for me it was a bit scary. But it was nice and the teachers were amazing so it was a good experience. (Lila, CSM)

Communication between ND and Prep course tutors is vital to the success of the course because the Prep course runs simultaneously with the students' ND. In fact, the particular relationships between FE and HE inform much of the way the Prep course is run at each college.

CSM's Progression Manager maintains a relationship with 15 partner FE colleges. Since they are located throughout London, she visits once a year and keeps in contact with a key tutor from each one primarily through email. She reflects on maintaining balance with the ND:

We have to be careful and do have to communicate with their BTEC tutors about the work we do with them. Make sure we aren't compromising their current course. The most important thing is that they come out with a good BTEC.

At HCA there are strong links between the ND and the Prep course, as they both run at the same site and their respective tutors maintain close contact. An ND tutor comments on working with the Prep course:

I wouldn't have been happy doing it if I didn't have as much communication with [the Prep course tutors] about it. Our team works really closely, and really closely with the students. That communication is important. Having those links.

Because of the way the Prep course is integrated with the ND at HCA, a lot of necessary communication happens around scheduling:

...every week for 8 weeks we let them have every Monday afternoon to meet with [the Prep course tutors][...] I said we won't run any activities on Monday afternoon because these guys will be out of studio.

A tutor from CSM also noted that further dialogue has been generated with FE tutors since they began sending written feedback to the colleges about how the students performed in their portfolio reviews.

3.1.4. Student strengths

In this section I turn the issue of curriculum and pedagogy around and focus on the Prep students' own strengths that they bring to the course - not to be discounted when considering the factors that contribute to successful progression. Some recent research identifies the coping strategies of non-traditional students in adjusting to and remaining in HE (Crozier et al., 2008; Harrison, 2006; Reay et al., 2007; Gorard et al., 2006). Any student who has gone through a programme of the intensity of this Prep course while simultaneously completing their ND must, by necessity, be **self-motivated**. An HCA tutor enthused about the vigour and spirit of a group that is mostly '16, 17, 18, 19' years old: 'they're energetic, they're fun and interesting individuals'. And a CSM tutor remarked, 'A lot of them come with this **determination**'. She added that the course is a 'big commitment' made even more difficult because some of these students 'have quite complicated lives [...] Some are supporting their parents and quite often care for their siblings'. Staff also spoke of the unique perspective their students bring to the course, and by extension, the college:

I think they're quite worldly. If I think of the ones that do well, they've all really gone through a lot to get where they are. They've gone through a lot to get their BTEC. There were some quite extraordinary personal stories. (CSM tutor)



Their **personal experiences** were also identified as a strength when it comes to art-making. As mentioned above, the students are encouraged to put themselves into

their work. As one tutor mentioned, they tell the students 'don't leave yourself at home'. And it is those personalities that they bring to the college that not only helps them succeed academically and artistically, but provides a spirited contribution to the institution as well.

3.2 Challenges

Different challenges were described by the staff at each college, and they ranged from course delivery to marketing and evaluation. As mentioned earlier, a CSM tutor pointed out the difficulty in 'negotiating difference' among students who have arrived from **diverse educational backgrounds**, but that this has impacted the teaching practice of the Prep course staff, even spurring them to reassess their teaching methods beyond their role on this course. She also mentioned that that one of the primary challenges of maintaining the reflexive view that all staff involved appear to have, is that it is difficult to **measure** some effects of the course, such as whether students are applying new language or critical skills. This was largely because of **attendance** issues. On a given day, she says,

Some people wouldn't come. Some people would come who didn't know what was going on because they hadn't been there before. So it was really hard keeping track of what was actually happening.

Due to the numerous commitments of these students inside and outside college, attendance can be a problem, but CSM's Progression Manager notes that the ones who stick around tend to succeed.

Another difficulty is that the Prep students' **portfolios** will not look like those coming from CSM's Foundation students, for instance, because their course is vocationally-focused and less specialised. One staff member said that as a result, the Prep students 'manifest themselves' differently when it comes to application to HE. This may continue to become less of a challenge as institutions make positive leaps towards embracing progression work.

Another issue raised by staff at CSM is the difficulty in using **workshop space** because current degree courses, understandably, have priority.

Many challenges highlighted by HCA staff correspond to their **rural** location. One, mentioned earlier, is that nearby art galleries are scarce. The course leaders have responded to this by organising group excursions to the New Art Gallery, Walsall and Ikon gallery in Birmingham, both major regional galleries with an international

outlook. Perhaps a more abiding challenge is that of marketing the Prep course to feeder colleges. At the moment, most students come from HCA's ND. **Recruitment** from farther afield is problematic:

Often the [feeder FE college] tutors are very positive but then they've got to market it to their students and we are at a remove from that, and they say to us, 'We're not going to be able to get our students here everyday'. We didn't start until 10 in the morning. But to get them there would be almost impossible and that's a real shame [...] we have a real problem with transport and the students are living on a restricted amount of money. (HCA tutor)

She points out that this is a major point of comparison with CSM and that it would be 'nice for our ND students to see other students from a different environment'. On course feedback forms, students also expressed a desire for a larger cohort. But, as will be discussed in the next section, sometimes features of the institution that presented challenges were *drawn upon* for their beneficial potential. On the small size of the course, an HCA tutor comments,

If you can see a student is going through a bit of a tough time or hitting a brick wall, that's the other thing about the [FE] tutors and us – we can talk to them, can have a chat, which is different from if our students were at other colleges. It's one way we can make almost more of a difference and make us a greater resource.



A further challenge for both colleges is **sustaining** the course, which will be discussed in section 3.4.

3.3 Transferability

Two primary strengths emerged in this research that aided the transferability of the course:

1) It is **reflexive**: staff constantly adapt the course in response to reports, research and their own observations on the ground. For example, effective developments in the area of student support followed *The Art of Smooth Transition* report (Hagger and Scopa, 2007). Another report noted that CSM admissions staff had expressed concern over the students' experience 'in the area of critical studies' (Hagger, 2007a). In response to the challenge of teaching critical and analytical skills, CSM's lead Prep course tutor is continually adapting the course. She described a new development she had in mind:

I think this year when we get them to do a presentation we're going to have a student observer...they have to notice [...] whether they address any concepts and ideas, whether they are able to apply the thinking around their activities on Facebook to something else.

This is an example of the valuable reflection and adaptation that, as HCA's lead tutor remarked, 'happens while you're running it'. HCA has made these kinds of adaptations as well, in the timing of the week long course or the location of portfolio development tutorials, for example.

2) Each institution takes advantage of its particular characteristics (some which might even have been considered drawbacks), to adapt the course. The lead tutor from HCA's Prep course describes the process of developing it at her college:

A lot of our changes were not in the material of the course, but in the challenges of running it in Hereford.

The initial stage of course development at HCA involved long discussions with Janey Hagger and observation of the CSM course. In CSM's week-long programme HCA's tutor found a flexible model:

what they did when they came to CSM – drawing and painting and printmaking – was a model that we could use. I'm a painter so one of the things I was recruited for was

that was my strength [...] we're not painting the same things but we're painting and drawing.

Prep course staff at CSM and HCA have both taken advantage of existing strong relationships they have with other courses at their institutions. At HCA where ties with FE are particularly solid, the Prep course is strongly allied with the ND curriculum. It coincides with the 'visual recording' unit on the ND, and painting and printing work made during the week-long programme can count towards the students' ND grade for that unit, so that the students 'didn't feel like they missed out on a week of college or week of holiday' (HCA ND tutor). This is invaluable at HCA in terms of motivating students to participate in the Prep course.

CSM, on the other hand, takes advantage of strong links with Byam Shaw's Foundation course. They have begun to incorporate elements of the Foundation into the Prep course, which holds much promise in terms of further shrinking the gap between the experiences of the FE students and those entering HE through a 'traditional' route. These links are discussed further in the next section.

3.4 Sustainability

The funding phase of NALN (2006-9) is ending and no new fresh streams of funding for the Prep course are imminent. Consequently the question now is: how to sustain the course without this support? Both institutions are looking at - and have even begun - integrating the Prep course into existing courses with which Prep course staff have ties at their respective institutions.

At CSM, the Prep course has already started to bring in elements of the Foundation Diploma (FAD), the course that comprises, along with A levels, the so-called 'Golden Route' into HAE. CSM is piloting the integration of Unit 6 of Foundation, a small 10-credit unit at Level Four, into the Prep course, 'further embedding the NALN workshop experience into the academic fabric of the College' (Hagger, 2009). Students will enroll onto the unit at the end of October, acquiring status as *official* CSM students with full use of library and computer facilities. As an additional benefit, students will gain a certificate. This kind of certification might also serve as a 'qualitative mechanism' that helps to clarify to admissions tutors just what a student has achieved on the Prep course. Course fees will be waived and it will be funded by UAL's Widening Participation core funding.



As a smaller institution with less core WP funding, HCA's Prep course leaders have also devised a creative response to the problem of sustainability. They aim to intensify already potent links with the ND by embedding the Prep course *into* the ND curriculum, offering it to all second-year ND students. This sustains the course in slightly different form; staff will be handling a larger cohort, for instance. However, plans so far maintain the course's basic structure. A week-long programme at the HE Centre (in November when HE is in session) is followed by 'a short programme of portfolio surgeries [...] where HE staff visit' (Vine, 2009). This integration will impact the ND, because during the week-long programme, first year ND students will be taught by second-year ND tutors, thus spreading the practice of bridging even further. It will cultivate links between FE and HE as well, because FE and HE staff are to collaborate on the new form of the Prep course.

When the Prep course is opened up like this, many of the benefits of the course, in terms of the relationships it fosters between FE and HE, and its institutional impact beyond Widening Participation programmes, will have the opportunity to blossom further. As one staff member remarked of the course, 'this could work for anybody'. And at least in the case of HCA's integration, more students will benefit from the course, although there may be a risk of losing some of the one-to-one dynamic they have enjoyed so far.



4. Conclusion

The Higher Education Funding Council for England has for some time looked to FE to play a role in meeting widening participation targets in HE (HEFCE, 2003: 9), and aims to improve routes to HE for those who do not hold traditional qualifications (HEFCE, 2006). The consequences of a failure to embed this kind of change could be far-reaching. In light of their recent sombre findings on the current state of social mobility in the UK, an independent Panel on Fair Access to the Professions proclaimed in a report released this summer,

We believe that the silos that divide vocational and higher education are an impediment to social mobility and must be swept away. (Milburn, 2009)

The Prep for HE course responds to a critical need, and the findings of this research indicate that the loss of the Prep for HE course would represent a step backwards in efforts to widen participation in HAE. The students interviewed for this research indicated that their transition to HE was eased as a result of their experience on the Prep course, and it is this period of transition which is crucial in terms of retention later on (Smith, 2003). The progression of many Prep course students works to dispel the notion that non-traditional students are a 'risky investment' for an institution (Crozier et al, 2008: 1).

NALN's Prep for HE course addresses specific challenges non-traditional students have been reported to face in progressing from FE to HE¹⁴. Its primary strength lies in the development of literacy skills. In retaining a high level of discourse and inviting

¹⁴ See Appendix 2.

students to make personal connections in the course of critical analysis, tutors (continue to) respond to the needs of their students and the realities of art college. This not only boosts student confidence (particularly at the interview stage), but forms a significant element of the independent learning and thinking skills fostered by the course that help to ease the transition to HE. The combination of this kind of rigour with pastoral care adds to the potency of its curriculum and pedagogy. Both institutions provide a level of support that aids the students in adjusting to HE culture and environment and accessing advice on issues such as loans.

Furthermore, the course leaders' and tutors' reflexive approach has enhanced the adaptability of the course to challenges and made possible its transfer from a large, internationally-renowned urban university to a smaller, rural college with a young HE provision. Both institutions effectively take advantage of strong relationships internally to enhance the course, and it may be this resourcefulness that ultimately impacts its ability to survive.



In addition to its responsiveness to the potential barriers to HE entry for FE students, the wider impact of the course within the college has been, as one staff member noted, to promote an attitude of 'let's look at ourselves as an institution'. Staff are exposed to a cohort more diverse in previous educational experience and socio-economic background than students entering through the 'traditional' route to HAE. Staff must address challenges that frequently prepare them more thoroughly for teaching on the BA. A benefit of much work conducted under the widening participation remit, such as NALN's projects, is that it often pioneers developments that are useful much more broadly, and the Prep course is no exception.

Right now, as the Prep course undergoes changes in the interest of its sustainability, practitioners will be faced with maintaining a balance between extending the benefits of the provision and continuing to provide the extra support that has so far impacted

the NALN students to an extent that is in many ways incalculable. I will close with some additional notes for the future of the course on the basis of this research, recommending that:

- the **pre-entry writing course** becomes integral to the Prep for HE course at any institution as part of its commitment to literacy development;
- high-quality **student support** continues (and student support and monitoring on a structured level where cohorts are large);
- the course is **publicised** widely, particularly so that HE staff are informed of the level of achievement reached by students who have completed the course;
- **critical reflection and flexibility** on the part of staff implementing the course so they might continue to respond to new challenges and changes within art and design education. It is also important to keep up a **dialogue** on the challenging aspects of teaching the course, such as the language component and the balance between fostering independence and providing support.

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