Supporting the transition from FE to HE:
A review of ‘bridging’ programmes within the NALN

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July 2009
Introduction

This report discusses the second phase of the NALN Bridging Strand project, which had as its focus bridging programmes from FE into HE across the NALN, as well as preparatory units/modules within the first year of undergraduate study, designed to facilitate the transition from FE into HE.

Bridging in the context of this research refers to pre-entry, discrete programmes, offered over a short period or running through the academic year. Integrated units/modules offered within the first year of a degree course which aim to prepare students for the demands of an HE course, are also included. It does not include Access courses, mentoring schemes, portfolio advice/days and taster courses.

The purpose of this strand of the project was to produce:

1. A manual of bridging programmes within the sector, providing details on each course’s structure and content, including teaching programmes, sample lesson outlines and materials. This is intended to be a means of sharing good practice.

   Programmes from seven NALN institutions have been documented in this manual. Information was obtained through a questionnaire, sent by email. Courses from three other non-NALN HEIs are included for comparison and interest. The manual is available in a separate section of this website.

2. An accompanying report, presented below, which summarises responses from the questionnaire enquiring into bridging provision completed by the participating institutions (see Appendix A).

1.1 HEFCE the larger context - widening participation and fair access

For HEFCE, widening participation remains a key objective:

Despite the expansion of student numbers, particularly since the early 1990s, some groups in society are still under-represented in HE. We cannot afford to waste talent simply because of a reluctance to foster it. That means continuing to reach out to those for whom HE seems beyond reach, not for any lack of potential, but often for reasons of family or community tradition. This challenge of widening access and increasing participation remains a crucial part of our mission (HEFCE, 2009).

Research carried out by Elaine Sinclair and Helen Connor (2006) shows that vocational learners (for example, students with BTEC Nationals and VCE/Applied A-levels) continue to face barriers to entry into higher education and are half as likely to be admitted into HE. For Stanton (2009), ‘a straightforward way to address this problem would be to re-invent the ‘transition’ or ‘bridging’ courses that used to exist.’ Stanton also shows that FE colleges, where much vocational learning takes place, cater for a higher proportion of people from widening participation backgrounds than do school sixth forms.
The bridging programmes from FE to HE, discussed here, aim to give students from widening participation backgrounds the confidence to begin their studies, by familiarising themselves with the way HE works, both academically and in their creative subject areas.

1.2 Realising the principles of widening participation through bridging

Principles of WP are applied both explicitly and implicitly: all the bridging programmes included in this report emphasise the inclusiveness of their provision in contrast to operating from a ‘deficit’ model of learning; this applies, particularly, to the integrated programmes which introduce all students, in the first year cohort, to the range of approaches to learning and assessment used within HE. A sizeable body of research supports the view that students need help in adapting to university life to become autonomous learners and that feeling positive and having a friendship group greatly aids social and emotional adjustment to higher education (see, for example, Yorke & Longden, 2008 and Davies & Elias, 2003).

2. Types of Bridging Courses

In providing some form of provision to prepare students for HE, the questionnaire responses reveal a widespread institutional commitment to widening participation through progression activities which go beyond just increasing access.

The responses from the participating institutions indicate that there exists a range of bridging/transition courses. These vary in structure, model and length from:

- Discrete pre-entry summer school programmes, with a specific WP remit, running over short periods ranging from one to six weeks, some with further extension days, some residential, and others with day courses;
- Discrete pre-entry summer school programmes functioning as feeder courses, with additional ongoing provision for these students within the HE programmes;
- Discrete pre-entry online programmes that are linked to the student’s forthcoming programme of study (one institution);
- Integrated but discrete on-course, one term academic skills programmes focusing on preparation for academic work at HE level (one institution);
- Integrated embedded on-course programmes, either of one term or one/two semesters length, combining theory and practice designed to engender ‘joined up thinking’ in students in pursuit of their academic and creative work at HE level.

3. Social capital in the sphere of higher education

Bourdieu (1997) sees the concept of social capital as part of the explanation for the persistence of class inequalities, which together with economic and cultural capital, operates to maintain structural inequalities and social exclusion. Social capital is
frequently used as a tool for analysing inequality in higher education, enabling researchers and policy makers to think about institutional and social processes and outcomes. Possession of social capital enables researchers to view it as a resource that operates at personal and/or institutional levels to promote or limit access to socially valued and often scarce rewards. Research conducted by Silva (2008), as part of a wider investigation by the Open University for the CCSE project, acknowledges connections between cultural practice in the arts and the ‘more educated’ and those in higher occupations. Social capital is seen by Putnam to have ‘features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam 1995: p 67).

Extrapolating from Thomas (2002), this report uses the concept of social capital as a means of analysing the important role the bridging courses play in addressing the dominant institutional, social and cultural norms processes which often operate to exclude ‘non-traditional and vocational students’.

3.1 Bridging as a form of social capital - academic

There is a substantial degree of overlap in the aims of the pre-entry and integrated first year programmes: both emphasise the benefits of providing students with social capital; these are posited by Blythman (2008) as ‘practices, taste, background knowledge and understanding …. valued for achieving success in a particular context/culture.’ In this respect, the bridging programmes can be seen to provide social capital in preparing students to acquire an understanding of academic conventions, and start the process of contextualising their particular branch of creative arts in a higher education setting.

The pre-entry programmes provide students with social capital through enculturation into a new academic culture in the following ways:

- Introducing students to the experience of working within an HE environment;
- Using HE staff to accustom the students to different styles of teaching and learning;
- Familiarising students with the language used in art practice at HE level;
- Developing learning and group work skills;
- Developing students’ skills in research and their use of visual diaries/sketchbooks as sources of primary research and documentation;
- Developing students’ abilities in relation to self-directed learning and practice;
- Enabling students to develop skills of self-reflection and evaluation;
- Providing opportunities for reflection and dialogue especially concrete v abstract;
• Addressing the language and culture of HE art and design, assisting in the preparation of student portfolios and preparedness for interview;

• Decreasing the culture shock and feeling of disadvantage experienced by students from WP backgrounds; and using HE staff to accustom students to different styles of teaching and learning;

• Increasing students’ confidence in themselves and their creative process, practice and self-belief.

• Developing portfolios, building up to interview as well as critique and interview guidance;

• Attempting to prevent information overload during the induction period, by allowing for a phased induction – (see the online pre-entry programme, Stepping Stones at Bournemouth University).

In a similar vein, the discrete and embedded bridging programmes within the first year of HE provide students with social capital through enculturation in the following ways:

• By providing an introduction to the range of approaches to learning and assessment used within HE;

• Introducing the key practices/’threshold’ concepts on their chosen course;

• Developing an understanding of what it means to be an undergraduate;

• Introducing the principles of reflective learning, which includes facilitating the wider development of students’ transferable and employability skills;

• Enabling students to move from description to analysis; asking questions of material presented; weighing up different arguments; and asking why;

• Developing skills in relation to academic writing and reading, presentations, group work, peer assessment, research and visual practices;

• Introducing students to a significant key concepts within cultural and historical/contextual studies;

• Delivering contextual studies alongside study and communication skills.

• Being context specific, subject-focussed and addressing the issues of identity transformation;

• Increasing students’ confidence in themselves and their creative process/practice, self belief;
• Decreasing the culture shock and feelings of disadvantage experienced by some students from WP backgrounds when they move from an FE to an HE environment;

• Focusing on the delivery of key curriculum content designed to engender 'joined up thinking' in students; i.e. learning to 'use' theory and make connections between theoretical and practical issues in students' own creative practice;

• Combining selected theoretical concepts with core research and communication skills in addition to the creative and conceptual skills of image making;

• Delivering the first combined theory/practice module that students encounter on the course.

3.2 Bridging as a form of social capital – social networking and support spheres

Social capital is perceived by Thomas (2002) as being fundamentally about how people interact with each other, i.e. as the "glue" which helps to move individuals and communities from exclusion to participation. Both Thomas (2002) and Tinto (1993) acknowledge the benefits that social networks provide through friendship, support and exchange of ideas.

The value of introducing students to both formal group work and informal social interactions is highlighted in all of the bridging programmes represented here. This is exemplified by:

• Pre-entry preparation: students stay in halls of residence on the campus, replicating the experience of being away from home for the first time and having to shop and cater for themselves;

• Formal and informal staff/student interpersonal exchanges, in one college, an online blog is set up for students to discuss and share ideas;

• The provision of lunch at the start of a residential week, in an informal relaxed atmosphere; this means that students find it easy to mix and make friendships with other students from the outset of the course;

• Groupwork, which allows students to recognise and learn from the skills of others and value diversity when much of the curriculum is around individual creative practice and essays. By fostering a culture of co-operative learning, students are prepared for their group projects;

• Relatively small cohorts on the pre-entry course; this enables the tutors to get to know the students very quickly and to tailor the course to each group.

• The timing of the course – some are held during vacation periods when the campus is quiet, enabling students to easily find their way around. Accessing resources such as the library is less intimidating.
• Attempting to facilitate the development of student relationships at three levels: with the university, with the course and between student and tutor. It also offers the potential for student-to-student social networking.

3.3 Bridging as a form of social capital – economic

The majority of the pre-entry courses specify widening participation student profiles for their entry criteria, namely, first generation, mature students and post-codes in deprived areas. As one institution offering a pre-entry course put it: “All students are invited to attend the course so there is no stigma attached to attending.” It should be noted, however, that for larger institutions, there are restrictions on numbers.

The fact that these courses are provided free of charge is acknowledged as being of crucial importance in maintaining a strong uptake. Pre-entry courses also report that the opportunity for one-to-one tutorials enables students to raise not only academic questions but also personal support issues in relation to finance, bursaries loans and employment. In this respect, social capital is acquired through empowering students to become more aware of the financial realities of being a student at HE level and learning how to access advice when necessary.

4. Developing self-evaluation skills and success

It is a prerequisite that bridging programmes aim to prepare students for HE, and this is evident in the strong match between the aims of the modules (academic, creative and personal) and the explicit aims of assessment, which are both formative and summative. Put simply, success for students is measured through gaining a place on an HE course.

Success, in some cases, is also measured by the conversion of uncommitted and unmotivated students into students who demonstrate confidence and ability, and subsequently make an application to a range of HEI courses.

As yet it is too early for the participating courses to provide statistical measures of success in terms of, for example, retention and completion of degree, but all courses require students to undertake some form of assessment and self-evaluation. In addition, feedback from students is regularly sought. Approaches to assessment and evaluation used by the various programmes are presented below.

4.1 Pre-entry courses – the assessment process

• Students complete an evaluative questionnaire at the end of the of the course. Success is also measured through qualitative feedback in focus groups;

• Success in gaining a place on an HE course;

• Students are asked to engage in a process of personal reflection on their own development and challenges;
- Peer assessment, which facilitates personal development;
- Undertaking group presentations. Here, book reviews, as part of essay research, and presentations on a topic of choice or response to a brief predominate;
- Undertaking reflection on aspects of group work, peer assessment, receiving staff feedback aimed at facilitating personal development;
- Formative assessment methods are used through the application of PPD criteria;
- Students participate in critiques and presentations, and undertake a tour of the work of final year art and design graduates;

4.2 Units/modules within Year 1 of HE designed to facilitate transition – the assessment process

4.2.1 Discrete programmes
- In broad terms, the success of the unit is measured in relation to students’ ability to manage subsequent assignments on their course in the first year; work successfully as part of a team, and engage successfully with the range of practices they will encounter on their courses;
- Summative assessment assignments are designed to promote an increased confidence in the student’s ability to manage the process of essay writing, through a piece of academic writing in a format appropriate to the student’s creative discipline, combined with a piece of reflective writing;
- Exercises used for formative assessment include a group assignment to build team working skills and a short, individual verbal presentation;
- In some instances, students are provided with open briefs, which allow them to follow their own interests, whilst still giving them a framework from which to work;
- Formal evaluation of the unit undertaken by students also provide an important measure of success.

4.2.2 Integrated programmes
The learning outcomes of 2 linked units are 'blended' in assessment practice, i.e. use of a computer or the library which are linked to essay writing. This allows for relevancy in the curriculum as it is integrated rather than a ‘bolt on’ to the main course;

A feedback session is held at the end of the module. Ongoing feedback in the form of focus groups continues over the 3 or 4 years of the course;

Student retention and achievement at every level are monitored through the curriculum;

Formal assessment encompasses demonstrating evidence of research; quality of sources; depth of engagement with images and other research material; evidence of critical evaluation and general presentation including appropriate referencing format;

Criteria are made explicit and weighting is given to assessing: seminar performance; a critical text; a photographic project and a workbook;

Informal assessment: at key points in the module, opportunities are programmed for students to gain feedback from peers and tutors, at tutorials, seminars and critical reviews. An online blog is also used to discuss and share ideas.

5. Issues in the provision of bridging

Responses as to what might be problematic in the bridging courses vary. These include locality, college organisation, ethical issues, timing and length of programme, as well as students’ perceptions of their learning needs.

Issues tend to be specific to the bridging activity planned. The majority of concerns relate to practical and logistical matters; for example, halls of residence, specialist facilities and technical staff being available; academic teaching staff availability over weekends and vacations for planned activities.

The main issues noted include:

- Ensuring cross-departmental and cross-institutional synchronicity regarding procedures and guidance relating to bridging and APL is noted as a problem for some;

- The need to continue to educate the institution in alternative ways of measuring a student's strength at interview;

- A tendency for students to perceive the bridging course as a vocational skills course, when the focus is on study skills. “I wanted more project work… I hadn’t expected all the written work”;

- Some students don’t like/don’t feel they need the study skills emphasis. “I didn’t need all those study skills”;


Recruitment – it is difficult to identify and recruit students most in need of pre-entry courses of this nature;

The timing of the course, for example, in the summer vacation. Mature students might prefer to take a family holiday instead of using annual leave to attend the course;

Where a course includes a residential, students might be reluctant to attend because they are in employment. It is possible, therefore, those WP students who would most benefit from attending, are also likely to be those who might find it hardest to attend;

Length of programme – one institution found three weeks too lengthy, and shortened its programme to a fortnight;

Difficulty in attracting people from outside London, as it is expensive. Students can use halls of residence, but still have to pay the full rate;

If visiting a museum, this needs to be carefully worked out, as the level of activity offered can be inappropriate. Success is dependent upon how the museum art/artefacts and learning activities connect with the study programme;

The course is generic, covering study skills, time management and so forth, rather than art-specific. Despite clearly stated course objectives, some students still expect the course to be more closely aligned to the vocational/art focus of their undergraduate studies;

Some students have expressed disappointment that the course is not creative i.e. they would prefer to do drawing/photography etc. The emphasis of the course is on areas that students find difficult when they arrive in HE, not the areas that they are confident in, such as their creativity.

Not all students will have access to home computers or be computer literate and in these cases it is vital that students are directed towards IT teaching and technical staff and free library access. This is an issue faced by all students but particularly those wishing to enrol onto an on-line transition programme.

6. Conclusion

Inevitably a variety of issues, notably, a lack of knowledge/confidence, local provision, distance and finance may adversely affect students’ ability to access both FECs and HEIs; nevertheless all the participating institutions in this research concur that bridging/transition programmes help to break down the barriers for students making the transition from FE-HE.

NALN progression agreements bear out HEFCE’s assertion that HEIs need:
...to collaborate more to meet an increasingly diverse set of needs. Some partnerships will be between universities and colleges, sharing expertise and resources to achieve what they could not do individually, for example...to offer new opportunities for students...to progress to HE (HEFCE, 2009).

In providing bridging/transition programmes, whether from an FE or HE base, the majority of responses from the participating institutions recognise that coming to university for the first time can be daunting for all students, but particularly so for first generation/vocational entrants. The colleges saw bridging as being essentially about enabling students:

- to become more familiar with academic culture and literacy;
- to become more questioning;
- to develop as autonomous learners in theory and in their chosen areas of artistic creativity;

Through this activity, students are able to attain a different social capital and the confidence to successfully make the transition from FE to HE.

The NALN institutions surveyed here proceed from a recognition that within HE there are exclusionary practices/discourses that actively disempower ‘non-traditional’ students, which are typically masked. Thus, the notion that such students enter HE with a range of deficits is rejected. As Sinfield et al (2004) put it, what is sought is “...to actively [empower] the student to navigate the often hostile and ... contested HE terrain and excavate academic knowledge for themselves” (Sinfield et al, 2004). At the same time, a change in institutional practices is needed if HE is to engage meaningfully with students from diverse backgrounds.

This survey of bridging provision, combined with the manual, provides a substantial resource. It demonstrates the benefits, issues and means required to facilitate and prepare not only students from widening participation backgrounds, but all students in their transition from FE to HE. It is clear that offering such programmes requires a considerable commitment, first from the institutions as well as those charged with managing and running the programmes.
References


# The Questionnaire

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<td>What does bridging mean to you?</td>
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<td>What is/are the aim(s) of your programme(s), i.e. why does your institution offer bridging?</td>
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<td>Please give details of participants re: Recruitment processes and entry criteria.</td>
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<td>Please give details of participants re: Typical course composition in relation to age, ethnicity and gender.</td>
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<td>Please give details of participants re: Do you attract 1st generation students new to HE. Do they form a noticeable proportion of each cohort?</td>
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<td>Does your programme link with feeder courses?</td>
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<td>How do you measure participant’s success? What do you see as working on the bridging programme?</td>
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<td>What do you see as being problematic about this provision?</td>
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<td>Are there any other issues you perceive in relation to provision designed to facilitate the transition from FE to HE?</td>
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