



Lifelong Learning Network

Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent, Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin

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Lifelong Learning Network (LLN)

Study Skills Support for Learners on Higher Education (HE) level courses, particularly the support required by HE learners with qualifications gained via the Vocational & Work-based Learning routes

PART ONE

Key findings and summary of Effective practice

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1. Introduction and background

1.1 Introduction

Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) were introduced by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) during summer 2004, to create progression routes and progression agreements into and through higher education (HE) for vocational learners in identified vocational sectors. The overall objective for LLNs is to improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education.

The Lifelong Learning Network for Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent, Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin aims to 'facilitate dialogue around a number of key areas:

- removing barriers to progression; helping learners progress into and through HE
 - developing existing IAG and co-ordinating related staff training
 - engaging employers; developing and adapting curriculum that is fit for purpose'
- (<http://www.llnstaffordshireshropshire.org/>)

The LLN's Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) and Student Support Group aims to: 'support the training and development of the wider community of specialist and informal IAG practitioners across the LLN Network so that they are better able to advise and support vocational and work-based learners to progress into higher level education and training'

It has been suggested that vocational learners are more likely to drop-out of HE during their first semester/year because of issues associated with adapting to the more independent approach to learning in HE. The IAG and Student Support Group has commissioned a statistical research project with support from the LLN Research officer to establish the statistical evidence about the retention and progression rates of vocational and work-based learners within the LLN and to understand more about the factors associated with retention and progression of vocational and work-based learners in LLN institutions. This statistical research project is due to report early in the Autumn term of 2009.

The statistical research project will then be linked with the findings from the qualitative consultation research exercise that has been looking at the Study Skills required by and available to HE learners with qualifications gained via the Vocational & Work-based Learning routes.

1.2 Nature and scope of the consultation exercise

This consultation report is concerned with the development and facilitation of HE 'transition' student support for vocational and work-based students after they have enrolled on courses provided by the LLN partner universities: Keele University; University of Wolverhampton; Harper Adams University College and the Open University and also on HE level courses provided by the LLN partner colleges within Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin.

Evidence has been collected from a range of providers of HE level courses in the LLN area about their policies and practice of study support for learners. The type and availability of such support that learners with vocational and work-based related qualifications require is the main focus.

The report describes and analyses the nature of the study skills support offered to learners and how learners access and make use of that support. It has sought the views of HE Co-ordinators, tutors/lecturers and student support services specialists about the support offered to vocational and work based learners, as well as the learners own views. It is a qualitative report rather than quantitative and looks at the appropriateness, effectiveness and resource implications of the different policies and practices in operation across the LLN's partner organisations.

2. Research approach to the consultation exercise

2.1 Objectives

This project aims to improve the retention and progression of vocational and work-based learners in the LLN.

It will:

- Help partners improve the learning support provided to learners entering HE via non-traditional routes and increase retention and progression rates;
- Help IAG advisors better understand the HE support that is available from LLN partners to non-traditional learners so that they can provide better pre-entry advice and guidance;
- Inform and share practice across the LLN.

2.2 Research approach and principles

Using qualitative research methods an in-depth view of the type of study skills support offered to students as well as an overview of the general support available has been obtained. The focus has been on support for students in HE who enrolled with vocational or work based learning qualifications, such as GNVQs, NVQs or BTEC qualifications.

In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with representatives from each of the partner Universities and University College. It has not been possible to visit all of the Colleges within the LLN area but information obtained from six of them does provide a good insight into support arrangements for HE learners within colleges.

Representatives in meetings included: Central Support Managers and Teams; HE Co-ordinators; Course Leaders; Lecturers and Directors of Learning Support Services. Representatives agreed to issue questionnaires to a number of their students to seek their views on study skills support requirements for vocational learners. Very few of these however have been returned.

Partners' websites, particularly the universities websites have also been reviewed to identify how they are used as a tool to provide students with study skills support.

2.3 Issues and points to consider when reviewing the findings

Whilst the intention was to look specifically at the type of support required by learners with vocational qualifications it became apparent that few institutions currently maintain statistics which provide a breakdown of the qualification background of students who access central support services. It has not been possible to identify if students with vocational qualifications accessed such support more than students with 'traditional 'A' level qualifications.

Not all university lecturers, tutors or central support staff have detailed knowledge of their student's qualification routes and when commenting on the type of study skills support required are often commenting about all students on the course and not just those with vocational qualifications- although assumptions regarding which students might hold vocational qualifications could be based on the mode and subject of the course, for example Foundation Degrees and HNDs but this cannot always be confirmed. College lecturers and tutors appear more likely to know the background of their students as often they have progressed through to their HE courses via their own college courses.

Whilst actual statistics to identify the background of who accesses study skills support is not often available to support the statement that 'learners with vocational qualifications require more support than those with more academic ones', individuals consulted have provided views and comments based on years of experience in their various roles in the institutions.

The LLN always refer to 'learners' in the various educational institutions and the workplace however most of the representatives involved in the consultation refer to their 'students'. The report therefore uses both of these descriptions.

2.4 Presentation of the research findings

As considerable information has been obtained about current practice during this research the findings have been separated into two reports: Part One; **'Key findings and summary of Effective practice'** and Part Two; **'A Directory of Current Practice'**.

2.5 Related research

Research reports which are also relevant to review that provide information after much lengthier national research include:

- The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2008- Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience
 - Personalisation of the first year: Dr Hazel Knox, Ms Janette Wyper
 - Introducing scholarship skills: academic writing- Fran Alston, Lesley Gourlay, Ros Sutherland, Karen Thomson
- Student Services: Effective Approaches to Retaining Students in Higher Education-Full research report and Directory of Practice-Liz Thomas, Jocey Quinn, Kim Slack, Lorraine Casey

The University of Wolverhampton's web site also includes results of a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning: Critical Interventions for Enhanced Learning (CIEL) project. Within the Embedded Study Skills element of a CETL project the CETL team at the University of Wolverhampton examined the impact of a module they provided called Learning for Success. This was a study skills module that all first year students in the School of Education took. The module set out core learning outcomes and activities that were then 'owned' and taught by subject specialists and was seen by students as a subject specific module. The materials and all information related to the module were delivered through the virtual learning environment with subjects tailoring such things as "sources of information" to their own specific requirements. In 2007 when they went for revalidation of the 3 programmes in this school, every module had some study skills embedded in the curriculum and so Learning for Success no longer exists as a stand alone module in the School of Education but the ethos and experience that it has generated is now fully embedded.

The Assistant Director of Learning and Information Services at the University of Wolverhampton has recently undertaken a review of the study support services provided to students. Key points raised highlight the need for easily accessible, equitable provision which can be provided by centrally supported 'off the shelf' resources with study support provision embedded further into all of the Schools and campuses of the University. The intention is: to have a recognised Study Skills Support management framework that will allow for accessible quality generic study support information which is fully used, whether accessed via the website or face to face; for study support skills to become even more embedded within all Schools across the University and with key staff responsible for its

implementation and all following the framework of Learning and Information Services at the University of Wolverhampton.

1. Policies and practice of student support for learners on HE courses -Key findings

1.1 Student Support

Student support offered by all of the universities and colleges consulted with includes: Study support; counselling; support to students with families; support to students with disabilities; support with employability and careers and health and welfare issues. A few also have peer mentoring.

Provision of pastoral, health and welfare support is seen as being equally as important to students as the provision of study skills as an aid to effective studying, whether they are full time residential students who are away from home for the first time, or local part time students- young or mature, who are studying, working full time and often with families to look after. One of the college course leaders builds in time and support during the first two or three weeks of his courses to ensure the part time students settle into routines, know the location of the facilities available to them, even location of nearest car parks as for some this creates additional pressure if they arrive late after not being able to park. Many students travel distances from their workplaces to the college and won't necessarily know the area. The tutorial support he provides has also extended to him contacting an employer with the student's permission to discuss solutions to ineffective working hours and study time situation.

Sometimes it is not easy to separate the need for study support and disability support. For example students with dyslexia often require assistance with maths, report writing and/or note keeping and may need additional resources, equipment and even staff to aid them in their studying. HE students are able to be assessed for the type of support required via the Access to Learning Fund. This assessment service and fund is also available to HE students studying in colleges.

Whilst some universities have separate departments that provide disability support and other study skills support, some bring all support under one central department. A central support service is in place in two of the universities which includes disability, health and welfare, counselling and study skills. One of these universities has been able to provide statistics on the number of students accessing study skills support in the last two years. This includes all students but unfortunately does not identify whether they are from an academic or vocational background and importantly includes students with dyslexia, which can be quite high so the separation from study support and disability support cannot accurately be made.

3.2 Specific Academic Study Skills support

The universities all provide a wide range of study skills support which is available to all students. This includes: support with assignment guidelines; time management; presentation skills; referencing; revision and study techniques; accessing library resources; and also additional maths and english support. This is provided via a combination of drop-in or pre-booked one to one meetings or through a wide range of workshops offered throughout the year, often involving dedicated support staff such as Study Skills Advisers, Study Skills Support teams, Academic Advisers or Student Guidance Officers.

Many of the work related or vocational HE level courses stipulate work skills and experience in the subject they wish to study as their main entry criteria, as opposed to set grades within an academic qualification framework. This focus on prior work skills or qualifications such as NVQs does mean that many students arrive with sound vocational and technical practical skills but no prior awareness of academic writing and so the need to communicate their knowledge is often the biggest issue they have.

Foundation degrees particularly have been designed to address this issue by including initial modules that focus on reflective and academic writing; time management; referencing; note taking; presentation skills and critical thinking in relation to the subject being studied. Harper Adams offers an Extended Foundation Degree Programme (EFDP). This is four academic years in length and includes a full year of employment with a work placement provider in the third year. Students receive around 16 hours teaching a week involving classroom work, practical sessions, group discussions and projects and are expected to complete at least another 16 hours a week on self directed study, preparation and assignments. Support is freely available throughout. Four modules are compulsory and are studied by all students on the EFDP course. They cover the following key skills and basic study skills: Information Technology; Academic skills; Numeracy and statistics and Current affairs.

A number of other HE level courses also include study skills within the course content, for example all of Harper Adams first year students have to undertake a 15 credit module called Academic and Professional Development (APD) which is 100% assessed by coursework. It has three elements: Effective communication which includes a report based on the University College's Report Writing and Referencing Guides; Career Development and Research Methods.

Before the students enrol on some of the HND or degree courses most institutions offer or insist in some instances if a student's entry qualifications indicate a need, an introductory/preparation course such as a National Award or an Access Course. For example: Keele University offer a Foundation Year which is seen as an excellent way to up skill an individual's qualifications. The Foundation Year forms an integral part of a four, five or six year honours degree; The OU offer a small number of Openings courses. These are short courses with lots of support and no exams, giving students a gradual introduction to their chosen subject and the world of studying. These are around 16 weeks in length

with approximately eight hours contact support available. These help to introduce a student to distance-open learning, how to access the student support, online materials and tutor. They are looking to see whether a generic skills opening courses might be appropriate as well as the subject based openings courses; Staffordshire University provides similar short introductory courses such as Summer Schools, Flying Start or Step Up to HE courses with a range of workshops helping students with their studying after enrolment including a 15 credit Information Skills Module which is run over 10 weeks.

The LLN developed and piloted a 'Skills for HE transition module' during 2008 which is designed particularly for vocational learners. A number of other colleges have now also decided to offer this to their FE students. Others offer similar preparation courses, Stoke on Trent College for example offer a 'Get Ready for H.E' course which is delivered using a range of teaching methods including short lectures, discussion, group work and research based activities. The course includes an hour personal tutorial each week. It aims to enhance students' study skills such as research, presentation and referencing; improve their written skills, critical analysis, and reflective thinking.

Most colleges are likely to provide HE students with study skills support via their course tutors with occasional additional support provided via their main college FE students support teams. Study Skills support is provided via the Vocational Skills Co-ordinator at TCAT who has a weekly 'slot' with students during their first semester. Funding to provide a dedicated HE central support service is often an issue for colleges as no additional funding is made available for specific study skills support for HE students. The colleges within the Staffordshire University Regional Federation (SURF) consortium are able to involve Staffordshire University's Central study skills support team and SURF Support worker during Foundation Degree course inductions. Many colleges either already have or are having dedicated HE Centres raising the profile of HE students in colleges and raising awareness of the need to provide specific support for HE students.

A number of consultees have remarked that central support can sometimes be too generic. Engineering or IT report writing for example is different to that required by Social Care or Education courses and so such support is best focused within a Faculty. In colleges particularly the tutors are all practitioners and aware of the employer's and actual job requirements so all study support can be explained by relating it to the subject studied. University representatives had similar views and whilst presentation skills, referencing, time management and revision techniques can be supported centrally, assignment and report writing requires an understanding of the subject in order to support a student effectively. There has always been a tradition of strong centrally supported study skills support for the health related courses at Keele University. A gradual process of change has started to move some of the delivery of this study skills support to the department where the student is working.

All HE students have personal tutors as well as course tutors/lecturers. Personal Tutorial discussions between student and tutor may result in the student being advised to see the Study Support Skills

team, or to access the on line study support if support cannot be provided by the Tutor. Considerable time is invested by tutors in providing informal one to one support, particularly in college environments. Often the HE course or group sizes are much smaller in colleges than in universities which allow the tutor/course leader to spend more time with a student. It is important to note that whilst study skills help is now available in some departments/faculties of the institutions some students do prefer to go to a central support location to maintain privacy and keep the support separate from their working areas and lecturers/tutors. If Centre support staff believe that a student would benefit by involving a particular lecturer or tutor, they will work with the student to encourage them to do this, but will always respect the student's decision.

3.3 Promotion of available Support

Welcome packs are used to inform students about the support they can access, including the range of study skills support. Some universities include post cards in these which students can post back asking for an appointment with a member of a study skills team, others issue identity card key fobs which provide all contact information and arrangements for accessing study skills, library and learning centre teams and information. Posters are posted widely around buildings, including student accommodation and student union buildings. A lot of effort is placed in working with the residencies to reach 1st year students.

Study skills central support teams spend a considerable amount of time circulating information to students and also staff. Announcements providing links to the Study Skills and library services support are placed on front page of student 'My Portal' sections of websites. Information is also put onto the LCD Plasma displays around the Universities and Colleges as well as on computers as screensavers at certain times of the year. Staff are briefed at staff meetings by central support teams.

Each of the Universities' websites holds a vast amount of information dedicated to study skills and library information for staff and students. They include: 'Welcome to new student' pages with links to appropriate sections; online study skills tutorials; key fact sheets; tip sheets and interactive resources. Staffordshire University's Assignment Survival kit is a resource which a number of other institutions also use with students. Links are also made into many other websites and sources of information for students to gain a better understanding and knowledge of such topics as; developing effective study strategies, assignment writing, note taking, grammar, referencing, revising, time management, online researching and many others. A useful website which Harper Adams link into to provide study skills support to students with dyslexia is the University of Sheffield's audio led website <http://dyslexstudyskills.group.shef.ac.uk/>. All the institutions have their own Virtual Learning Environments which also hold study skills resources.

At Keele University the Centre for Learning and Support drives the policy on student support but departments can deliver the support how they want to. Referral of students to the Centre by staff is informal which is similar to the arrangements at Harper Adams and works well only because they are both relatively small, based on single campuses and the main teaching staff know members of the central teams by name. A new development this year at the University of Wolverhampton has been the introduction of an 'internal' staff study skills support page on the website that all Personal Tutors can easily access to use with students. This will be reviewed to see if it has resulted in Personal Tutors themselves providing additional study skills support or if increased referrals have been made to centrally located Study Skills Advisers.

The Colleges within the Staffordshire University Regional Federation consortium who involve the SURF Support Worker or Study Skills Support Team during inductions to Foundation Degree courses, advise students about the support available and issue information packs from Staffordshire University which includes information about the library services and facilities, study support services, websites with an A-Z of all of the university services which they are entitled to access.

Some Faculties have 'assignment feedback' forms that refer to the Study Skills Support available and attach the Study Skills Support information leaflets when returning assignments as an encouragement for students to contact the central support team.

3.4 Part Time students

Many of the HE students who might be classed as 'Vocational' or likely to have vocational qualifications are those studying part time on such courses as Foundation degrees or HNDs. Often it is the quantity of work which is the biggest shock to these students, with time management a big issue due to having to fit studying in with work priorities. A high proportion of these students are mature students who require support not necessarily just because they might have vocational qualifications but because they have been away from education for so long. The use of IT whether it is to write assignments, search for online journals and information or when having to carry out presentations using power point can be an issue for part time mature students working in very practical environments such as care homes or nurseries as they often have had little experience of IT and are lacking confidence in this area. The fact that the institutions' web sites hold a vast amount of study support information does not help them until they become more comfortable with IT and have regular access to equipment and the internet.

Student support services and study skills support are offered to all students whether full or part time, however many part time students attend courses in the evenings when often central study support teams are not readily available. In such instances the tutor or lecturer is the one who needs to provide all necessary support or identify when to arrange for specialist support staff to attend. Some Faculties have lecturers who have some of their time funded to specifically help students with study skills. A

number of institutions that have part time students are now reviewing their central support teams' availability and making study skills advisers available during evenings, week ends and holiday periods. Many library and information services are open seven days a week for long hours until midnight or early morning, with a trial currently going on in one, for 24 hours opening.

A number of mentoring and peer mentoring systems are in place to aid first year students particularly and a 'Study Buddy' initiative has only very recently been introduced to a small group of students at one university during their research module in the final year of their Early Childhood Studies course.

3.5 Feedback from Students

Few feedback questionnaire forms have been returned by students and so analysis is quite limited. Replies were received from 11 students based within 3 institutions. The intention was to gain some feedback via the statistical research project's focus groups, unfortunately none have yet been held. The type of support accessed by the students who replied is included in Part Two of the consultation report- '**A Directory of Current Practice**'.

These 11 students were made up of: 10 full time students and one part time; two 1st year; six 2nd year; two 3rd year and one 4th year students. Qualifications they hold already include: six with BTEC National Diplomas; one with NVQs and also attended an Access Course; one who attended an Access course; one with 'A' levels; one with a Foundation Diploma and one with a National Diploma plus 'A' levels. Seven of the students commented that: the study skills support was 'helpful'; 'helpful-useful'; 'it was exactly what was wanted-helpful and useful and is improving my writing skills and assignment work'; 'it was a great help with assignments and managing time and 'very helpful'.

Two 2nd year students said they didn't access support because they didn't know about and didn't need it, but had ticked to show they had received support in tutorials and were aware of how they were informed about it, possibly indicating that it was centrally arranged non-class based support that they were not clear about or had accessed. 1st year students at the same institution had indicated they had accessed support in class and how useful it had been. This could also be an indication that support and its promotion had improved for the new intake of students.

With regard to the statement that 'it has been suggested that vocational learners are more likely to drop-out of HE during their first semester/year because of issues associated with adapting to the more independent approach to learning in HE', some of the students responded as follows: ' Agree'; ' happens sometimes'; 'some might'; 'Yes- I think this is probably because they are unaware that there is help available and are also probably struggling with the workload –like me!'; ' don't agree' ; ' Don't agree- it helps to know the staff and be in the same place'; ' I agree that this can sometimes cause complications' ; 'Agree'; ' Being a more practical based learner I understand how challenging it is for

vocational learners entering a more academic environment. The admissions tutor had made it very clear though what to expect. Being a mature student however I took advantage of all the support available' and ' Expectations increase from 1st and 2nd year so the academic element increases and need to become even more independent'.

The part-time issue of juggling work loads is raised here and also the fact that being a mature student out of education for a while creates a need for support which the student had made good use of. One of the 'A' level students had also indicated how useful the support was to him. Many of the above students also hold BTEC qualifications which do require some independent studying and academic writing. This suggests that it is not simply the type of qualification held prior to enrolling on HE that will indicate whether more or less study skills support is likely to be required.

4. Conclusion and summary of effective practice

4.1 Considerations when providing study skills support for students with vocational qualifications

- Not all 'vocational' students lack independent and academic study skills-the type of vocational qualification must be considered-is it course work/competency based portfolio work or project based with research and reports?
- Students with vocational qualifications are often studying part time and in full time work. Work priorities can affect their time management and so practical support in managing assignments and work is important.
- Part time students must be able to access the same type of study skills support as full time students. Support needs to be available at any times, including evenings/weekends - whether via central support provision or via lecturers/tutors.
- Timing of support is critical-but varies! Initial support is required to help students 'get started' on their courses but too much too soon will overwhelm some (for example, despite Fds having study skills initial modules many students still struggle to understand referencing) - on the other hand some students may have more time to do their course work and prefer to work at a faster pace than others to get assignments complete and so require more in depth support early on in the course. Ongoing, repeated support is required which is flexible to meet all requirements.
- Many students with vocational qualifications are mature students who are not familiar with IT and need additional support with this before anything else, particularly if they are to access the support online and via websites. Report writing is often a skill that these learners also have to re-learn.
- A vast amount of resources are available on websites, but this needs to be fully demonstrated as well promoted via leaflets/notices if full use is to be made of it. If students need support navigating through the sections this should be provided during initial stages of a course. Similarly a tour of library/ study facilities should be provided to make students feel comfortable about using them.

- Students with vocational qualifications often lack confidence in their own academic ability and also need to be helped initially with the language or 'jargon' associated with HE.
- Study skills support provided by tutors/lecturers relating it to the actual subject or work context can be easier to understand and respond to for some vocational students as opposed to 'general' support via central support teams.
- Provision of clear feedback on assignments is required. Some tutors/lecturers provide detailed feedback others don't. The size of group and numbers of assignments to be marked is an issue but if the student does not understand the comments he/she cannot rectify any identified problem.
- Smaller groups allow the student to develop a relationship with the tutor/lecturer that gives the student confidence to ask them for support whereas large groups do not always make this possible.
- Smaller groups allow the tutor/lecturer to work with and support the student in a much more supportive way with more opportunity to have regular one to one meetings to integrate and relate study support into the practical course work.
- Some students prefer to obtain support from a central support team to keep this private from their lecturer.
- Advisers providing one to one study support must not be used by students to do their proof reading for them nor allow students to become too reliant upon them.
- Most colleges are likely to provide HE students with study skills support via their course tutors with occasional additional support provided via their main college FE students support teams. Provision of support via a central team is often an issue for them as no additional funding is made available for specific study skills support for HE students.

4.2 Study skills support activities identified as effective practice

- Strong pastoral support initially that helps students' settle into their courses and locations also builds confidence and break down fears of academic report writing.
- Central Study Support and Information Services teams who work closely with Faculties and departments and if appropriate, with their linked colleges, often with involvement in joint delivery of inductions and modules as well as provision of bespoke support to courses.
- Informal one to one tutor or course leader support as well as small group working that allows for study skills support such as report writing and assignment completion to be related to the course work and subject area.
- Provision of 'general' central study skills one-to-one support as well as group workshops at times to suit attendance patterns and locations of all students-not just full time students.
- Centrally provided study skills general support that is accessed via a mix of drop-in and appointment methods.
- Centrally provided study skills support delivered by post graduates who are familiar with issues that new students face.

- Provision of up to date materials and/or information to tutors/lecturers on a regular basis enabling them to refer students to appropriate study skills resources, whether staff support or materials, or to provide the support to the students themselves.
- A range of approaches within an organisation to support students- 'one size does not fit all'.
- Assignment feedback processes which are: informative, make recommendations on the specific study skills to address and which also provide information on how to access the support.
- Clear and easy to navigate websites that provide study skills information- contacts, details of workshops/events as well as online tools and tips sheets.
- Effective Information, Advice and Guidance at enrolment stage that identifies and encourages students to make use of stand alone Study Skills modules and/or HE preparation courses that can be studied before or alongside a course to develop the necessary skills.
- Study Skills modules which are integrated, are a core element of courses and also build upon support given through any earlier transition to Higher Education activities.

4.3 Do vocational/work based route learners require different support to that offered to academic route learners?

The suggestion that vocational learners are more likely to drop-out of HE during their first semester/year because of issues associated with adapting to the more independent approach to learning in HE is quite broad. It has been pointed out that there is a difference between students who have vocational qualifications gained via an NVQ route and those with BTEC or diploma courses. Students generally who have BTEC or CACHE diplomas for example will have experienced academic writing and research and be as familiar with such as 'A' level students. In fact one respondent believes that the BTEC students are more likely to be used to independent study than 'A' level students who 'have been a little more spoon fed regarding provision of information and set work'.

Feedback indicates that students should be and in most case are, provided with the support they need regardless of their qualifications background. Whilst it appears there is no specific targeting of individual students on HE courses to ensure those with 'vocational' qualifications receive additional study skills support, targeted support can be identified for courses deemed to be vocational such as Foundation degrees (Fds) and which are likely to attract 'vocational' students. Some students on Foundation degrees however may have 'academic' qualifications and are taking the Foundation degree route because they address the employer or Industrial Sector's requirements, not because they don't have the academic qualifications to enrol on other degree courses.

This targeted support is mainly achieved via the introduction of 'study skills' modules within each Foundation degree, usually it is a first module but in some cases included throughout in a number of course modules. The majority of Foundation degrees are delivered to smaller groups of students via

colleges who are more likely to provide study skills support in the context of the subject being studied via tutors and course leaders.

Not all lecturers/tutors are aware of the qualifications held by students on their courses and so comparisons cannot easily be made, although assumptions might be made due to the nature of the courses that many students are from a vocational background. There is agreement that there is clearly a need for help with report writing, time management and referencing skills in particular. For Foundation degree courses whether or not this is solely because they are students with vocational qualifications as opposed to the fact that they are often 'mature' students who might have been out of education for a while, studying part time and also working full time remains debatable.

Initial findings on some of the full time animal husbandry and land based HE courses are that students do struggle to prepare coursework to strict deadlines or prepare for unseen examinations and may find the 'reduced practical-more academic' a shock.

The majority of students studying at one of the universities reported on have 'A' level qualifications yet the University feels study skills support is just as important for these students as other institutions believe is for their more 'vocational' route students. This probably indicates that all new students need study skills support initially, whatever qualification route may have been taken.

The changes to the 14-19 curriculum, particularly the new diplomas is introducing more vocational aspects to studying and also includes more independent studying, critical thinking and report writing skills and so in the future HE students with 'A' level qualifications may not be the 'norm'- students with vocational qualifications may be.

4.4 Summary

The findings suggest that it is not simply the type of qualification held prior to enrolling on HE that will indicate whether more or less study skills support is likely to be required, factors such as whether they are full, part time or mature students may indicate more of a need than the type of qualifications held.

The type of experience and skills they bring with them if in employment are also important. This also dictates how and when the support should be provided to address the circumstances of each student which can be quite different to the next. Flexibility of promotion and delivery of support as well as its timing is critical to effective support and therefore retention and achievement of students. Central drop in or pre booked support must be available to suit all patterns of attendance, which may mean late evenings and even occasional weekends to support students who may only attend part time and during the evenings. Considerable study skills information is available on websites but all students must be made aware of this and how to access it. Some mature part time students may not always

have easy access to computers or the internet and until they become familiar with IT or gain access key information needs to be available to them through other means.

Clearly, support with academic writing, researching and studying is required by students when they initially start on their HE courses and also throughout their first year, particularly until they begin to gain confidence and understand more about the learning process and know how and when to ask for specific help as they face new modules. Targeted support to help them as they make the transition from their 1st year to more in depth and focused work during their 2nd and 3rd years of a course is also required. Embedded support within a course ensures the subject and learning process is understood but does rely on the tutor/lecturer spending time on supporting the learning as well as the subject area. Centrally organised support is still required for such 'general' study skills as referencing, using libraries/ online systems and revision techniques that are common to all courses. Close and effective links are needed between support teams and faculties to ensure that timely bespoke support can also be provided to a course to meet the needs of particular courses as well as students.

The variation in backgrounds of HE students, qualification pathways and mode of study in these pathways means that there is no one ideal approach to the type or provision of study skills support. The feedback obtained during the research shows that 'A' level students also require support with approaches to studying and writing, but as with those students with vocational qualification, it may not be all of them and not all may require the same type of support. Flexibility in the provision and type of support is needed but as always, financial resources may dictate what can be provided rather than what is needed.

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