Widening participation: the Skills for HE experience

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Introduction

Lord Leitch (2006: 3) argues that 'unless the UK can build on reforms to schools, colleges and universities and make its skills base one of its strengths, UK businesses will find it increasingly difficult to compete'. He suggests that one way of solving this problem in advance is to ensure that the number of adults qualified to level 4 and above exceeds 40 per cent and to ensure a commitment to continued progression is in place.

Pokorny and Pokorny (2005) suggest that the UK Government's widening participation strategy has brought new pressure to higher education (HE) including dropping progression and retention rates. They suggest that curricula need to account for individual differences between learners and should not assume that learners are able quickly to become independent learners on entry to HE. Hughes (2007) suggests that one solution to the problem of decreased retention in non-traditional groups of learners is to provide good learner support. There have been a number of interventions and innovations across England to meet the aims of the widening participation agenda and these have included meeting the study skills needs of non-traditional learners, including vocational learners. For example, Guest (2000) suggests that traditional entrants to HE start their courses with certain skills, including critical thinking skills such as logic and reasoning, in place and he argues that this is a prerequisite to entry. He suggests that non-traditional learners may not use the same skills and that access and level zero courses, for example, have been designed to provide these learners with the skills to progress to HE.

Knox (2005) suggests that non-traditional learners need some preparation to 'bridge the gap' between further education (FE) and HE, and argues that a module developed to allow learners to understand, for example, key skills and assignment expectations may help progression, retention and performance among this group of learners. More recently, Fergy et al. (2008) evaluated a study skills weekend course aimed towards learners from diverse educational backgrounds. They suggest that the course can facilitate both emotional and academic preparation for study at a HE level by focusing on raising learners' confidence in themselves.

The Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent, Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) aims to create progression agreements and routes into and through HE for vocational learners in identified vocational sectors in line with local skill needs. The targets

of the LLN include new progression agreements and new awards including foundation degrees, honours degrees and continuing professional development (CPD) packages.

One of the projects lead by the LLN has been the development of a new module, Skills for HE (fifteen credits and delivered either at HE level zero or HE level one). This is designed to encourage vocational learners to progress into and through HE. The module covers a number of topics such as research skills and techniques, developing critical thinking skills, academic writing, reflective learning and presentation skills. The course is assessed by portfolio, which the learners work on over the course of the module. All the learners also have the opportunity to do a presentation at the end of the course although this is not assessed. Learners are also provided with a CD-ROM containing all the course materials to allow them to access information outside the classroom at their own pace. All the learners have one to one tutorials with the course tutor.

At level zero the course is run as either a standalone module or alongside a numeracy and literacy module which leads to a foundation certificate. At level one the module is embedded within a Foundation Degree (FD). It is seen as advantageous to run the course at both levels in order to allow as many learners as possible to access it. The levels are differentiated by their learning outcomes and assessment.

Research questions

The research team met during the planning of the module to discuss what needed to be known in order to ensure that the module was fit for purpose, in other words that it would meet its aim of progressing learners into and though HE. The team was particularly interested in examples of good practice that could be incorporated into the module and also what key stakeholders' opinions of the module were.

1. What FE and HE bridging module/study skills courses are available nationally?

2. What FE and HE bridging module/study skills courses are available regionally?

3. What are the learners' opinions about the course?

4. What are the opinions of FE and HE staff about the course?

Method

Focus groups

FE and HE staff from across the LLN area were invited to be involved in the staff focus group. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that staff from both colleges delivering the course, the private training provider and the four universities in the LLN were involved. Unfortunately no participants from the private training provider or one of the universities attended. Two focus groups were held with a total of nine participants across the two. One

participant, who was responsible for designing the Skills for HE course, attended both focus groups. She was invited to the focus groups to ensure that the participants had access to detailed information about the course.

Questionnaires

Data from the Skills for HE course learners were collected from a cohort of learners who started a pilot of the course in summer 2008; all learners were invited to participate. The learners (n=45) attended a variety of courses at Stoke on Trent and Stafford FE colleges, Acacia Training (a private training provider), and the Faculty of Health, Staffordshire University. Of those learners, fourteen accessed the module as a level one module on an FD in Paramedic Science. The learners were from a variety of disciplines: Health and Social Care, Early Years and Teaching Assistants. The questionnaires were piloted for test retest reliability and content validity, and showed good reliability and validity.

Ethical considerations

An ethical application was made through Staffordshire University and this was successful. All the institutions involved were approached to ascertain whether any access permissions were needed and these were put in place where necessary. All participants received a study information letter and gave their written informed consent prior to the study. All data was stored securely in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Literature review

A systematic literature review of peer reviewed journal articles was carried out to explore specific study skills/bridging courses for vocational learners in both FE and HE institutions nationally. This was seen as an appropriate method to explore a variety of information around study skills/bridging courses for vocational learners.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were:

- Searching articles from 2000 onwards - older articles will be out of date due to the fast changing educational climate.

- Research based in England - other countries will be operating within a different educational system.

- Research articles only, i.e. no letters, opinion pieces, book reviews, etc.

- Articles evaluating specific study skills/bridging courses for vocational learners that may be stand-alone or embedded, and may be aimed at other groups of learners as well.

Five databases were searched including EBSCO and ERIC. Various search terms were employed such as access, bridge and progression. Initially the literature review uncovered

more than 10,000 hits, 103 full texts were read and 18 met the inclusion and exclusion criteria and therefore were included in the review.

Analysis

The articles were reviewed to identify the main themes, and a random ten per cent sample of papers were reviewed by a second reviewer in order to establish inter-rater reliability, which was high. Numerous details were collected from the eighteen reviewed articles including the location and length of the course and the main findings of the research.

The focus group data were explored using thematic analysis. A portion of data was analysed by a second researcher in order to ensure reliability. The themes derived by both researchers were very similar illustrating good inter-rater reliability. The quantitative data from the questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics; the qualitative data were coded to be grouped into common themes.

Results and discussion

Literature review

The backgrounds of the eighteen articles reviewed varied and included recent government policy, changes in the demographics of the learner population and work building on previous research. A variety of research methods and analysis were used, from interviews and focus groups analysed thematically to quantitative studies that used inferential statistics. A number of studies utilised method triangulation in order to explore the picture more fully. Some articles used a pre and post course evaluation and others were longitudinal, investigating changes over time. Not all articles were research based, some focusing on describing and reflecting on initiatives.

Articles evaluating specific courses

Tait and Godfrey (2001) note that there are recent changes in the learner population as a result of widening participation policies. They aimed to evaluate a fifteen credit module designed to bridge Higher National Diploma (HND) learners to the penultimate year of a university degree course. The course ran over two weeks with additional sessions throughout the academic year. The module had a number of aims: for example, to develop independent study skills and to build self-confidence. Learners reported that their experiences of HE were enhanced and that they appreciated the support they received. The authors report that the performance of the learners was similar to that of traditional learners but acknowledge that this cannot be directly attributed to the bridging module; however, they suggest that the module was successful in smoothing the transition from FE to HE.

Tierney and Slack (2005) suggest that lifelong learning features in many European policies and FDs are one way of meeting the Government's aims of widening participation. They

reported on a qualitative study of learners on an FD, focusing on their views of studying for the qualification. The authors report that learners started the FD for career-related reasons, although they perceived secondary benefits including an increase in self-confidence and other life skills. They reported that it was difficult for learners to juggle competing demands on their time and that they needed emotional and practical support to do so, and that some reported financial difficulties. Another area of concern was the lack of adequate assistance from tutors when it came to writing essays. The authors conclude that learners must be provided with appropriate support in order to reduce their chances of withdrawing from their course.

Articles describing initiatives

Bond and Wilson (2000) describe a group of work-based courses delivered in HE centres for levels three to five accessed by Information Management and Technology professionals working in the National Health Service (NHS). The awards were designed in response to various national initiatives. The authors describe the key characteristics of the awards; for example, they are gained via a flexible, portfolio approach to learning, development and assessment by presenting evidence of competence and knowledge against a series of defined outcomes. The courses use contract learning and Accreditation for Prior Learning and attract both academic and professional accreditation. The authors conclude that the awards have a wide range of benefits for multiple stakeholders: learners, employers and assessment centres and professional awards themselves including an opportunity to contribute significant to the national movement for reform of higher level academic/vocational qualifications frameworks.

Wilson et al. (2005) describe an FD that was developed as a result of the Government's widening participation agenda, the FdSc Health and Social Care. The course has four main drivers which have been met with varying degrees of success: to increase the number of highly skilled technicians and associated professions; to contribute to the lifelong learning and widening participation agendas by attracting people from under-represented groups; to offer progression for learners with vocational A levels or advanced modern apprenticeships; and to provide flexible modes of delivery including distance learning and part-time study allowing learners to 'earn and learn'. The authors conclude that there are more questions to be answered; for example, to what extent will FDs attract new types of learner and will they meet the needs of adult learners?

Limitations found

The authors of the literature highlighted a number of limitations including small sample sizes, uncontrollable variables and the lack of a control group. The literature review also highlights a number of issues. Firstly, there is a large amount of information missing, including information about ethics, piloting, sampling method, sample type and size, and gaps in the descriptions of methods and analyses gaps. This means that it is sometimes

difficult to rely on the conclusions drawn by the authors. Furthermore the vast majority of articles collected data from learners; only two collected data from staff and none collected data from employers. Considering that many articles focused on work-based learners and learning it is interesting to note this gap, which means that the overall findings from this research are effectively one-sided.

Focus groups

The thematic analysis of the data elicited twelve main themes. One participant talked about external drivers in the planning of study skills courses for vocational delivery, citing her professional body. The course appears to be suitable for a variety of learners in FE, from different disciplines and at different stages in their careers. Participants suggested that study skills teaching was available in school sixth forms, and FE and HE institutions but suggested that the consistency of this could be variable.

Participants cited a number of barriers to learning for level three vocational learners including fear, commitment, academic skills, IT resources and skills, practical constraints, cultural differences, and costs for both the institutions and the learners. Participants expressed concern about learners having different learning styles and whether the course could accommodate these, and discussed the need for flexible, ad hoc learner support that was designed to meet their needs. Participants discussed a number of issues around delivery including timing, course flexibility, alternative modes of delivery, learner support and the geographical location of the course. They also discussed the relevance of the assessment including whether it was the right quantity and prepared learners for university.

Participants argued that losing learners could be a problem and that the course could improve retention by giving learners a taste of university and changing their perception about university. Participants suggested that progression through HE could cause difficulties and argued that the progression agreements of the course, for example, guaranteeing an interview for a university course, were positive. They were also positive about being able to do the course and then step into HE at a later date.

A really interesting theme was around the perceived problem with NVQ, with the participants expressing their concerns that NVQ learners are viewed as second class citizens, who are not academically able. This is illustrated by the following participant quotes:

> Participant 3: I think the trouble is, the college, we've always been classed as second class citizens, NVQ, when students come in.

> Participant 4: It's a mix, some academic staff who go [*whispers*] they're NVQ, no that's not academic enough.

Participant 4: You hear academic snobbery, don't you?

Participant 7: Absolutely, absolutely.

Arguably the most positive theme from the data was the story of the way a particular learner had developed from being terrified at the outset of the course to being able to carry out her presentation at the end of the course and her readiness then to progress to an HE course.

Participant 1: ...one particular girl was terrified of computers but she did a PowerPoint slide without breaking the computer [*laughter*] and she was so proud of herself. But it still provided a focus for us behind her and she spoke beautifully and [was] relevant, but she still managed it and she was so proud of herself. Initially when she came on the course, the very first day, she was in tears by the end. But to see how she continued through the course and she came out a completely different person: she was absolutely transformed, she was thinking differently, she was ready to progress. She started off going I don't know why I'm doing this and why they're making me do it. She could see it and she wanted it and I think that was the biggest thing I saw.

Questionnaires

Many learners felt that they had received enough information prior the start of the course, although fourteen stated that they had not. It is interesting to note that, of those, eleven were enrolled on the FD in Paramedic Science. Interestingly eleven of the learners enrolled on this award suggested that free or cheap refreshments would make the course more attractive to them. The learners suggested that the most useful forms of assessment would be essay or class presentation. This is a remarkable finding given the high levels of anxiety associated with learners having to do a presentation. Many learners suggested that they would consider distance learning although a number would not; this finding may require further investigation to understand how distance learning materials should be developed for this course and why some learners are not interested in distance learning. Interestingly none of the learners believed that they had been involved in Aimhigher activities, although they may have been involved without being aware of the brand.

Overall the course, including the CD-ROM, was evaluated very positively and suggestions for change were very infrequent. Some feedback illustrated that learners would have liked a certificate on completion of the course and that some would have liked the course to have been run with a numeracy and literacy element included.

Recommendations and conclusion

This project has resulted in a number of recommendations which are drawn from the findings of the literature review, focus groups and questionnaires.

Course development

Planning:

- HE staff must review support services and study skills courses in response to dialogue with FE staff.

- Providing courses for non-traditional students can be very time consuming and this needs to be taken into account by the course organisers.

- Educational environments need to be arranged in ways that promote deep learning approaches and facilitate independent learning.

- Courses should be designed to be cost effective to the institutions delivering them.

Delivery:

- Alternative modes of delivery should be considered without compromising the quality of the learning process; for example, running the course over a shorter or longer time period, running the course at different times of day or at weekends, and running the course as a blended or distance learning course.

Evaluation:

- Education providers need to evaluate the curriculum thoroughly to ensure that new initiatives meet learner needs.

Preparing learners

- Where learners do not have access to a course such as Skills for HE, it is vitally important that they have access to adequate study skills advice, particularly if they intend to progress to HE.

- Further work is needed around how to prepare learners for success in HE in order to allow them to build on credit from their FE qualifications and work-based learning.

- Problems that learners may encounter such as fear, lack of academic skills, lack of IT skills or access to IT, cultural differences and practical constraints such as childcare, location and costs must be resolved.

Research

- Further qualitative research is needed to examine the issues in more depth and quantitative research, to provide generalisable findings.

- More longitudinal studies are needed to examine whether the positive effects of courses remain over time.

- Future work should investigate the opinions of the employers that the learners work for or that they may work for in the future.

To conclude, there is a variety of work that could be done to build on the recommendations presented. For example, it is important that existing gaps in study skills are understood and that appropriate courses are planned and delivered. Furthermore it is essential that these courses are thoroughly evaluated and meet the needs of both learners and their employers. Although there is a variety of similar courses offered across the LLN, none are offered as a blended course, e.g. using distance/e-learning. However, the LLN is due to pilot a blended learning version of the Skills for HE module and this will be evaluated using the same tools as those used for this study.

It is important to note that in its current form the level zero version of the Skills for HE module is unable to attract government funding. This is because a level zero course cannot attract funding from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) as it is an HE module and it cannot attract funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) unless it is attached to a full HE award. Hopefully the results from this study and the evaluation of the course when it is rolled out may be used to make a case for future government funding but if this is not possible then other funding models may need to be considered. This represents the major advantage of running the course at level one, for example, by embedding it in FDs, and this would help learners progress through HE but it would not meet the aim of progressing learners into HE as with the level zero version.

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