

# Degrees of success: the transition between VET and HE



## Project update

The *Degrees of Success* project aims to investigate the ways in which people with Vocational Qualifications (VQs) make the transition to Higher Education (HE). The project consists of three interlinked parts, which are intended to be interlocking rather than stand-alone elements. At the heart of the research design are a set of User Forums consisting of practitioners from both the HE and Vocational Education and Training (VET) communities.

The quantitative analyses until now have centered around UCAS data about applicants and admission. Two questions can be tackled with this: Firstly, do students with a VET background show different patterns in relation to a) their chance of applying for a full-time place in HE anyway, and b) their chosen subjects. Secondly, how does a VET background influence the chance of being accepted to HE. These questions have been answered on an aggregated level. The next steps are some more disaggregated analyses, looking at the admission process in more detail. Another task will be to look at some other datasets. However, we are still waiting for the merging of two datasets by the relevant institutions.

In the qualitative part of the project the entire intake of students in 3 subject areas (nursing,

IT and business) in 5 HEIs (Pre and Post 92 universities and FE colleges in England and Scotland) has been followed through their first year of studies (2006/07). Two questionnaires were administered: the first investigated students' transition into HE study and was administered early in the year; whilst the second, investigating the students' experience of HE study, was administered at the end of the academic year. 1106 'Transitions to Higher Education' questionnaires were collected with return rates of HEI 1: 74%, HEI 2: 46%, HEI 3: 67%, HEI 4: 68% and HEI 5: 69%, Business: 50% IT: 66% and Nursing: 81%. The data is currently being inputted for the second 'Expectations of Higher Education' questionnaire. Interviews were also carried out with students, lecturers and admissions staff. 66 interviews have been carried out to date, with 78 people (some of the interviews were in pairs or groups).

These two parts of the project are supplemented by the User Forums which have a twofold role: firstly, they will be used to discuss and disseminate the findings of the project to make them relevant to the widening participation agenda. Secondly, the User Forums will refine the project's research questions and develop new tasks for the quantitative and the qualitative part of the project. The first round of User Forum meetings brought together practitioners in HE and VET at two meetings earlier this year, see the report below.

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## User Forum report

*"Through professional partnerships between researchers and users the relevance, significance, quality and impact of each project's research can be enhanced."* TLRP website

The aim of the first round of User Forum meetings was to bring together practitioners from the Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE) communities, alongside experts from relevant administrative units, policy makers and members of the research team to discuss the project's research questions and preliminary findings.

The southern forum met in Oxford in January and the northern forum met in Glasgow in February. Both meetings followed a similar schedule: 3 short presentations (theoretical background of the project, preliminary results of the quantitative analyses, overview of the qualitative instruments) followed by discussion with the participants.

The discussions were both lively and helpful. One major discussion revolved around the distinction between VET and HE. It became clear, that, besides a "working definition" based on the available data in the administrative datasets, the project has to establish a clear, theoretically-based definition of what "vocational" means. This is something we are currently working on. Other suggestions made by User Forum participants were fed back into the development of the qualitative data collection instruments.

### Contact us:

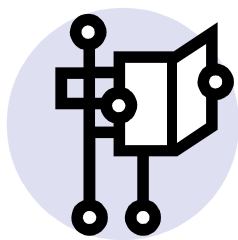
Degrees of success project  
Department of Education  
University of Oxford  
15 Norham Gardens  
Oxford OX2 6PY

**Telephone:**  
01865 274010

**Email:**  
degrees-of-success@edstud.ox.ac.uk

**Website:**  
www.tlrp.org/project%20sites/degrees





## Reviews

### *“Vocational A levels and university entry. Is there parity of esteem?”*

This is the title of a recent working paper from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), written by Phil Vickers and Bahram Bekhradnia, which might be of interest to those concerned with widening participation.

On the basis of different available datasets the authors compare traditional and vocational A-level routes into HE. Their main message is, that the proportional under-representation of vocational qualifications in HE is justifiable, when taking ability into account.

The paper poses some interesting questions and provides some instructive analyses. For example they try to show that:

- GCE A-level pupils on average had a higher number of GCSE passes than VCE A-level pupils

- grades in GCE A-levels and VCE A-levels are equally demanding and therefore comparable, taking prior achievements into account (which seemed not to be true for Advanced GNVQs)

- differences in attitudes towards HE between the two groups are mainly, if not only, a result of different academic ability

- students from vocational backgrounds, if anything, are overrepresented in HE, when taking prior achievement into account

- addressing non-participating GCE A-level pupils might be a better way of increasing HE participation.

The results are certainly worth thinking about. However, from my perspective, there are some problems: The most important of which is the question of measuring “academic ability” only by the number of GCSE passes. The research literature can show a quite strong relationship with this measure and different (socio-economic) characteristics that are not linked to “academic ability” per se.

Overall the paper has an attitude of defending traditional A-levels instead of taking vocational qualifications in their own right. Nevertheless, as already said, the text is definitely worth looking at.

A summary/the full report can be found on the HEPI website:

[www.hepi.ac.uk](http://www.hepi.ac.uk)

*Michael Hoelscher*

## What's new

The website ([www.tlrp.org/project%20sites/degrees](http://www.tlrp.org/project%20sites/degrees)) has been recently updated to include a new page about the User Forums. The update also coincided with the creation of our Virtual Research Environment (VRE) on the TLRP site (<http://groups.tlrp.org/portal>) which forum participants can access.

Keep an eye on the Forthcoming page on our website for other news, such as:

### Working papers:

Hayward, G. & Hoelscher, M. Students with VET background applying for HE. Findings on the basis of current UCAS data.

Dunbar-Goddet, H. & Ertl, H. Degrees of Success: Research on the Transition from Vocational Education and Training to Higher Education.

You can download copies of our working papers from the Download page on our website.

### Events:

We attended TLRP ‘FE in HE WP Event’, Cardiff, June 2007

Hubert will be presenting a paper at ECER 2007, Ghent, Belgium, September 2007

We will be attending the 2007 SRHE annual conference, Brighton, December 2007

You can download copies of our conference presentations from the Download page on our website.

### User Forums:

Organising southern forum, to be held in Oxford, September 2007

Organising northern forum, to be held in Glasgow, October 2007

You can get information about the User Forums on our website and participants can contribute via our Virtual Research Environment (VRE).